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LAURA ERLE.

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LAURA ERLE.

A Nobel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

‘BLANCHE SEYMOUR,’ ‘ERMA’S ENGAGEMENT,’
ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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1873.

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LAURA ERLE.

CHAPTER I.

AFTER her return from Melbury, Laura told her mother about her quarrel with Claude. As John's debts were no longer a secret, there was no further cause for concealment, had concealment been possible, which it was not, as she would not go to Enleigh while Claude was there, and the cessation of his visits to the Rectory gave rise to much comment.

Charlie Dashwood had come home; and as he had known Laura from her babyhood, and was almost as fond of her as if she had been his sister, it was impossible to refuse him an explanation of her apparent estrangement. Audrey had therefore to tell him something of the state of the case.

‘Then that accounts for aunt Eleanor’s determination to have the Ellis girls here,’ he said. ‘She wants to bring that about,’ for Mrs. Elliott had insisted on inviting Violet and her brother to Enleigh. That was part of her plan. It was no use to give Harold Carew the opportunity of seeing Laura if she did not also provide a young lady for Claude, who would make opportunities of seeing him.

Violet came armed for conquest, having quite made up her mind as to the best method of shortening line. There was much gaiety; skating all day, for it had frozen hard, and every pond and lake about the place was a sheet of ice; music and dancing at night.

Charlie Dashwood had the most profound admiration for his brother’s intellect and ability, as well as the strongest affection for him, and he determined now to effect a reconciliation between him and Laura. It was out of the question that Claude should marry Violet. Charlie could not conceive a worse fate for a man. He had great faith in Claude, but even the cleverest man needs the corrective

and incentive of a sensible wife—that was Charlie's opinion—and Violet would not be sensible.

Besides, there was Laura. She looked miserable. Harold Carew was not more touched by her fragile appearance than was Charlie.

There are certain states of mind and body deserving of real sympathy, which nevertheless, for some mysterious reason, only excite ridicule. Sea-sickness is one; a man suffering from the pangs of wounded or disappointed love is another. Even tender-hearted women combine to laugh at him.

Claude suffered at this time as much, more, in many respects, than Laura; but no one felt the least pity for him, while she was an object of the most tender interest and compassion—to the gentlemen especially. Charlie and Digby vied with each other in courteous attentions to her, manifesting their unspoken sympathy in a thousand delicate ways.

Harold, loyal to his promise, had not spoken to any one of that meeting under the

ash-tree, but he was not long left in ignorance of the cause of Laura's distress. Charlie, never very reticent, took him into his confidence, as he had taken Digby and Lady Emily, so that the young lady, much to her surprise and annoyance, found herself the heroine of the hour, and her every look and tone made the subject of anxious observation and eager comment.

She was fully aware of this, though nothing was of course ever said before her, and was so disgusted at finding herself thus put *en évidence* that, even when there was no probability of meeting Claude, she would not go to Enleigh. Harold Carew was the only one who never joined in the discussions respecting her; but he would sometimes ask Audrey, if he happened to meet her alone, how her friend was; and he frequently spoke of her to his mother, too frequently for that lady's peace of mind.

She felt boundlessly benevolent towards the whole Erle family; Laura was her especial favourite, the object of her extreme admira-

tion and love ; she would have considered her, in fact, the most desirable daughter-in-law for any one—save herself; for the acute observer may have remarked that the benevolence of mothers of eligible sons towards impecunious young ladies always stops just short of the point of wishing for any permanent connexion with them.

Laura, as somebody else's daughter-in-law, would be too charming a sight. Lady Emily would give her such a beautiful wedding-present; nor could any right-minded person see the least justification for Mrs. Elliott's objections to Claude Dashwood's desire to make her his wife—they were narrow and ungenerous, even worldly. Claude was a second son, with no prospect of any landed property; such a marriage was in every way suited to him. It needs little appreciation of the fitness of things to see the difference between his case and Mr. Carew's. The latter was an only son, heir to Melbury; on him depended the honour of the family (though he would spell his name in that unfortunate

manner); he belonged to his county—his country, in fact—not to himself at all, and must wed accordingly.

It will be observed to what very opposite conclusions the arguments used by Lady Emily Carew and Mrs. Elliott led them.

Since the day on which Claude had seen Laura and Harold together on the encampment he had made no direct effort to meet her; yet he lived in constant hope of some chance encounter. He persuaded himself into the belief that the meeting between them had been prearranged, though deep in his heart he knew that the girl was as incapable of making any clandestine engagement as of robbing a house; but the supposed belief gave him something definite to expend his anger upon. He was certainly morose and jealous enough to excite any one's pity. He rarely joined in the conversation, or shared the games or amusements of the others, and was become so irritable that it was difficult to live in any sort of peace with him.

Yet he might have consoled himself with Violet, whom Mrs. Elliott continued to throw at his head with skilful ingenuity;—and a very pretty thing she was for any one's consolation, as she went forth to skate day after day, the keen air heightening her lovely complexion, her sunny blue eyes dancing with a prevision of coming matrimonial triumphs, her little feet peeping in and out from under her somewhat brief scarlet petticoat, and a hat of marvellous form and plumage surmounting a head fearfully and wonderfully got up.

She dressed five, not seldom six, times a day. At breakfast she came down looking as fresh as a spring flower, in the very last fashion in morning robes; then, according as they drove, skated, or walked, she appeared in a suitable and costly costume; at luncheon she was gorgeous in all the colours of the rainbow, looking like nothing so much as a plate out of *Le Follet*. The afternoon saw a fresh toilette; and the evening—but what common pen could describe Violet as she

burst on the astonished vision at dinner? The variety, beauty, scantiness of corsage and amplitude of skirt constituting her dresses would need a court milliner for the due chronicling thereof. It was in the days of hoops, and Violet was as broad as she was long. Even the most enthusiastic lover could not possibly have put his arm round her waist. She was armed so strong—in steel—that he could not have got within two yards of her.

Her head was consecrated to Flora; tufts of variegated grasses hung down behind; roses and lilies sprang from the top; a wreath of violets graced her brow.

Sometimes, however, as if to show that there was no attire she could not render becoming, she would appear as sweet simplicity, *i.e.* in a long trailing white dress, without any ornament whatever, neither bracelets nor brooch, only her own hair, much less curled than usual, and one diamond star over her forehead.

The sensation was great the first evening she sailed into the room in this mediæval

costume ; and at dinner she almost took Harold Carew's breath away by suddenly asking him if he did not think she looked 'like a pre-Raphaelite archangel ;' having previously addressed the same inquiry to Claude, between whom and Harold she was seated.

In truth, whatever she wore, she looked charming, by force of her youth and brightness and happy-heartedness. She was like a bird or a butterfly, longing innocently to show its gay colours in the sun ; and it was not her fault that she had no soul, that the little moral feeling she had by nature had been carefully suppressed, and that she had been brought up to think running a man to earth the one occupation for a woman.

To the possible husbands assembled at Enleigh she was an unending source of amusement and amazement. They watched her entrance each evening in pleased expectation, prepared for any and every development of fashion and eccentricity. Even Harold Carew could not but be mollified towards her, though he stood in terrible dread of her designs (he

did not know how he could have survived it had she insisted on marrying him), and never looked at her without a keen recollection of his sufferings on one occasion when envious Fate had decreed that she was to be his partner at whist, and she, the lead being hers, absolutely declined to produce a trump, while he was morally certain she held five.

‘Alas, regardless of their doom, the little victims play!’ Violet played on, triumphantly happy at this time, undisturbed by any presentiment of the stormy waters into which she was steering her small bark. It would not be smooth sailing over the sea of life with Claude for steersman, with his capricious exacting temper, his large requirements from others—women especially—and the small return it was in his power to make.

Yet Violet might have taken warning. There were storm-signals enough.

Not only was he gloomy and irritable during the day, but a pitched battle between him and Harold Carew usually crowned the night. There are certain men who always do

their quarrelling at dinner. If they don't wage war over the number of creatures they either have or ought to have killed while out of doors, they are sure to begin on politics, and then all hope of peace is at an end. The feminine assistants in vain endeavour to change the subject, finding ample reason to agree with king Solomon in the admirable remarks he has left on record respecting a dinner of herbs.

The state of things at Enleigh happened to be particularly favourable to this prandial warfare just at this conjuncture.

Owing to the frost there was no hunting; owing to the shortness of the days the gentlemen had to come in doors early, and, not being tired enough to sleep, had several hours to devote to the improvement of their minds. It was during the height of the struggle between the North and the South, and they met at dinner fresh from the perusal of the newspapers, having secreted a vast amount of annoyance or triumph, according as the party whose cause they espoused had lost or won.

Claude and Harold always flew at each other like two angry dogs. They differed on every possible subject save one. Both were irresistibly attracted—one consciously, the other unconsciously—by the same woman; but this one point of agreement only added bitterness to all their other differences, and they were in the habit of fighting their battles out in public with acrimonious bitterness.

Harold was a warm supporter of the North, while Claude as eagerly upheld the South; and as dinner progressed and the combatants grew excited, the battles were all fought over again, and the same arguments produced night after night with as much *verve* and freshness as if they had never done duty before.

Harold was, it must be admitted, a provoking adversary. He was in a minority; but that didn't daunt him in the least; and he was as sarcastic and cutting and aggravating as he knew how to be when he chose, and not the less so that his antagonists were generous in laying themselves open to attack. 'The Southerners were gentlemen, and the

slaves better off than English labourers.' That was their usual line of argument. The withering scorn with which the Northern champion maintained that those facts had nothing whatever to do with the right and wrong of the matter in question tended rather to the relief of his own feelings than the conversion of his opponents.

It remained true that the North was at this time a sore trial to its friends. It was always being beaten or doing something it had better not have done; so that belief in it was a constant exercise of that faith which is a confidence of things hoped for, an evidence of things not seen.

But Mr. Carew's allegiance never wavered. Even if the South got the best of it at first, right would triumph in the end, and in the mean time,

'I fully agree with a remark Miss Erle made to-day—that it is nobler to be defeated with the North than victorious with the South.'

Claude started as though he had been

stung. How did Carew dare to quote Laura? The knowledge that his views were in accordance with hers on the controversy secretly added bitterness to his discussions. That Harold should quote her was a terrible aggravation. They had met again, then; had conversed with each other. Where had they done so? Carew must have gone to the Rectory; for he had ascertained that Laura had not been up to the house. Or had she met him again by appointment?

He sat with glowering eyes, brooding over his wrongs in silence, except when he spoke to Violet from time to time.

Every fresh access of anger against Laura was something in the former young lady's favour. She had no objectionable views of her own on political and social questions; she did not know a Federal from a Confederate, and was quite willing to accept all Claude said on the subject. In fact, she thought it 'quite right that some people should be slaves, you know, if they can't take care of themselves, and all that.'

This beautiful sentiment from Violet's pretty lips was balm to Claude's wounded feelings. How refreshing was a woman with receptive tendencies and devoid of enthusiasms!

In this respect Laura was very faulty. She was enthusiastic about a number of people and things, like a country-bred girl who has not yet learned that a *blasé* indifference to all, save oneself and one's small interests, is the perfection of good manners. And her enthusiasms had always jarred on Claude. He liked to see her face light up and her eyes flash with the reflection of some inward thought, but he would have wished for the effect without the cause; and he did not, or could not, see that these enthusiasms were the wings that bore her up above the many cares of her hard life—a life that had little of adornment save the strong and beautiful affection which bound the whole Erle family to each other, and which was, in truth, an ornament above all price; that they were a part of her absolute disinterestedness, her

fearlessness, her boundless capacity of self-sacrifice for those she loved. Without her enthusiasms she would not have been the Laura he loved at all, but only a rather pretty and attractive coquette.

‘There has been such a set-to between Claude and Carew,’ said Sir Digby, falling into a chair by Audrey’s side, on coming into the drawing-room after dinner. It was his wont now to sit beside her, so much his wont, that on his appearance other gentlemen yielded the place to him as his of right.

‘After the ladies left the room, they attacked each other ferociously, and things got so bad at last that Charlie and I had to come to the rescue.’

‘I did beg Claude not to get into an argument to-night,’ said Audrey in a tone of annoyance.

‘It was that unfortunate remark about Laura that did the mischief. Your sex as usual, Miss Dashwood, at the bottom of everything.’

‘I can’t think what made him introduce

her name. She was not speaking to him. I didn't even know he had heard what she said.'

'It betrays a suspicious attention to all her remarks. Claude had better look out.'

But Mr. Carew had had no intention whatever of putting forward any boast of an intimacy with Laura. He quoted her merely in accordance with his rule never to repeat another person's sayings without acknowledgment.

'The Carews are going away in a day or two,' said Audrey, 'and I really shall not be sorry now. These scenes at dinner are dreadful.'

'The best way to stop them would be to bring about a reconciliation between Claude and the young lady. Is that impossible?'

Digby and Charlie both thought Audrey very lukewarm on the subject of this reconciliation.

'I never think interference does any good,' she replied.

'Not as a rule, but there are cases—'

He directed his looks towards the sofa,

where Claude had just taken his place beside Violet, an expression of strongly repressed temper in his eyes, which might well have made any girl, gifted with the least power of observation, hesitate before linking her fate with his. Violet was observant enough; her vigorously expressed opinion of Claude's temper would hardly bear recording, but she did not intend to let his temper interfere with her happiness; she would go her way, and if he chose to sulk, that would be his affair. Violet had no practical knowledge of what ill temper—especially in a husband—means. The Ellises were amongst the most sweet-tempered of the human race. Nothing put Mr. Ellis out, and his sons inherited this enviable characteristic. Violet would rather, of course, that Claude had been less gloomy and morose, but as it suited her to marry him, those attributes of his must not be allowed to interfere with serious business. She chose to talk of Laura this evening. She had been to the Rectory that afternoon, and had had a long conversation with her.

‘Why doesn’t she come here now? I thought she almost lived at Enleigh.’

‘She has not been well.’

‘No; but she is better. She looked very pretty to-day, and said she was quite strong again.’

Claude thought bitterly that she had consoled herself with ‘that insufferable prig, Carew.’

‘What do you say to that?’ asked Sir Digby, indicating by his glance the pair on the sofa.

‘Don’t speak of it! It is dreadful!’

‘Do you think so, really? I don’t see exactly why.’

‘You don’t? Is Violet Ellis your ideal of a good wife for any man?’

Digby liked Claude the least of all the Dashwoods, and was secretly of opinion that Laura was much too good for him.

‘Not my ideal, Audrey; God forbid. I was not thinking of ideals at the moment; but now that you speak of them, I should say she came nearer Claude’s ideal than Laura does.’

‘You mean that he prefers a distinctly inferior woman?’

‘They are different types,’ he said evasively. ‘To tell you the truth, Audrey, I don’t think Claude half appreciates Laura, or ever could appreciate her; nor would she ever have the highest kind of happiness as his wife.’

‘Yet you seemed to wonder I did not try to bring about a reconciliation.’

‘Well, I did, for of course, as things are usually judged, the match is in every way desirable for her, and a reconciliation much to be wished for; still, if that can’t be brought about, I don’t consider that his marriage with Violet would be such an unmitigated evil as you imagine.’

‘Digby! It would be the greatest of all evils. A girl who never thinks of anything but dress, who hasn’t an idea!’

‘And don’t you see that that constitutes her fitness for him? He doesn’t want ideas in a wife; he thinks it, on the whole, more convenient that she should be without

them. Laura's power of judging for herself would be a perpetual annoyance to him, and she would find that out in six weeks, you may conceive with what results to herself. She would be much happier with a less clever man, who, though he might not always understand her, would simply love and admire and be proud of her, without trying to repress her.'

Audrey had good reason to know how much of truth there was in his remarks.

'I had always hoped that he would learn to appreciate her; and she would make him so happy,' she said despondingly. 'Perhaps it is because I am a woman that I have such faith in the power of affection, and Laura's affection would be a tower of strength to him.'

'I have never doubted that the marriage would be for his happiness. I was thinking of her.'

'I cannot wish for what would not be for her happiness; still it would be a terrible thing to me to see him married to Violet. I

do hope you won't encourage such an idea on his part.'

'You know I would not do anything you dislike; but remember this—Violet has more sense and character than you fancy. She is not clever in Laura's way, but she has plenty of quickness and sharpness of her own, and she won't suffer from his temper as Laura would.'

'He would suffer from her, though. To me she is the least attractive girl I ever met.'

Digby did not at all agree in that estimate of Miss Ellis.

CHAPTER II.

TILL made aware of the fact by Charlie, Mrs. Elliott had not known that Claude had proposed to and subsequently quarrelled with Laura. On hearing it she expressed much indignation at his want of generosity and his prejudice.

‘If a man is fool enough to go in for a love match, he ought to do it like a gentleman, not drive a bargain like a huckster. When a girl has only her heart to give, and she gives it freely, she has given all she can, and the case is even between them.’

Audrey was agreeably surprised; for though aware that, where real good feeling was concerned, her aunt was the soul of honour, she had yet feared that her dislike to the match would, in this instance, blunt her keener sense of its claims. She gave delicate expression to some such sentiment.

‘I say frankly, my dear, that it would be ruinous for Claude to put his head into such a nest of poverty. A girl like Laura could not live in luxury and see her family driven for money without being miserable. She would fret, and Claude would be bound to help them. He would have brought the responsibility on himself, and could not shirk it. It is all very well to say a man doesn’t marry his wife’s relations. He doesn’t; but the rich man who could see his young wife fretting herself away because her parents and legion of brothers and sisters could scarcely keep the wolf from the door, and who refused to do anything for them, would be a monster; and Claude isn’t that. He is as reckless about money as all Irish people are; he would give as long as he had anything to give, and then, as his own family increased, where would he be?’

‘I’m sure the Erles would never intrude.’

‘John Erle would take the coat off his father’s back, child,’ said the lady decisively, ‘meaning to return it, I grant you, only he would never find a convenient time for doing

it. Laura ought to marry a much richer man than Claude, or a poor man with whom it could never be a question of helping her family. However, I have no doubt they will make up their quarrel, in which case they will marry, and repent at leisure.'

'Why should they repent, aunt Eleanor?' impatiently, feeling a secret fear that Mrs. Elliott's opinion would coincide with Sir Digby's.

'Great heavens! Conceive being tied for life to a man with Claude Dashwood's temper! In five years he would have worn all the life and spirit out of her. She is one of those fools who would be miserable every time he sulked, and as sulking is his usual condition, a nice time she would have of it!'

'And yet you want him to marry Violet, who would certainly be less able to manage him than Laura?'

'That is just it, my dear. Violet won't manage him at all. Whether he sulks or smiles will be a matter of perfect indifference to her, so long as she can dress herself as many times a day as she pleases.'

‘Well, I must say I think every one is very unkind and unfeeling about poor Claude!’ exclaimed Audrey, whose anger against him was fast melting into sympathy, at seeing her friends combining to set a black mark against his name. ‘You all talk as though he were a brute, who would make any woman miserable: if he marries Laura, he is to make her wretched; if Violet marries him, she will make him wretched! Is there no such thing as happiness in the world, then?’

‘Happiness, my dear? Well, that is a pleasing fiction—about which I would advise you not to excite yourself.’

‘Still, when one is young, one does like to look forward to just a little enjoyment,’ said poor Audrey, in whose veins the vigorous life was throbbing, and for whom the years had not yet brought their dismal freight of broken idols, vanished hopes, and disillusion—worse than death.

‘Yes, my dear, when one is young,’ answered the lady. ‘I, too, have been in Arcadia.’

‘And found it pleasant, dear aunt Eleanor,’ said the girl, kissing her, and speaking as if she would force some acknowledgment from her that the world was not all gloom.

One is so full of trust and hope when one is only twenty.

‘Yes, niece; I found it pleasant. But always remember that you have to come out of Arcadia again.’

‘Must one always come out?’ asked Audrey, with a dim foreboding of the pain of that dreary journey, when

‘The light that never was on sea or land’

fades into darkness before the traveller’s saddened eyes.

‘Yes, child; my experience of life has taught me that there is no exception to that rule—except, perhaps, to fools and dreamers.’

‘Then I hope I may always be a dreamer,’ said the girl earnestly; ‘but even if I have to wake, I should like to go into Arcadia just to see what it is like.’

There was no need for her to undertake

such a journey. She was already in Arcadia—whether for good or bad—and all around her lay the golden light.

She had known Sir Digby Forester more or less all her life, and though his long absence from home had interrupted their intimacy, it had been readily resumed, as has been seen, on his return after his father's death. He had all the qualities which endear men to women in domestic life. He was utterly incapable of moral brutality, unfailing in his gentleness, and gifted with an enormous power of sympathy with the feelings and sentiments of women. All the happiest memories of Audrey's childhood and girlhood hung around him; and as he had shielded her in many a juvenile trouble, so he now showed a discriminating sympathy in the trials she occasionally underwent from Mrs. Elliott's temper. In offering this sympathy, he never did violence—as Claude often did—to her affection for the person whose conduct called it forth.

And Mrs. Elliott liked him, even while

expressing some very unjust contempt for his intellectual powers. She took that pleasure in his society which clever women who have passed middle-age take in that of a young man, bright, good-looking, and with a manner affectionately deferential to themselves.

People who are really in Arcadia never look forward. The present absorbs all their faculties. And Miss Dashwood was no wiser than her neighbours; yet, without any distinct anticipation of coming events, she was yet conscious of some vague happiness in the knowledge that her aunt liked Digby, under whose escort she daily disported herself on the ice—her eyes looking dark and beautiful with fresh air and happiness; the rich colour mantling in her face, and giving it just that animation the slight lack of which was its only defect.

The greater number of guests had left Enleigh, but the hard weather continued, and skating was carried on with undiminished vigour by the remaining visitors. There was no water at Oaklands, so Violet and her brother

still stayed on; and detachments of Ellises came over daily. One bright face and graceful figure alone were missing. Laura never appeared, but Sir Digby and Audrey regularly ended their diversions at the Rectory—where they had tea, and duly reported to the recluse all that had taken place. A summary conclusion was put to their enjoyment, however. Executing some wonderful evolution under Sir Digby's auspices one day on the ice, Audrey fell and sprained her foot.

Not feeling much pain at first, she walked home, thereby considerably increasing the inflammation, and a six-weeks' confinement to the sofa was the consequence. It was a terrible trial to poor Audrey. She had never before been so happy and gay. It was dismal work to lie in her boudoir, while the sun shone joyously, and every human being was out of doors.

But she did not long languish in solitude.

Sir Digby Forester was one of those men who are always breaking some part of their persons. There was so much of him that, if

he fell, one portion or other of him must inevitably be damaged. It was, in truth, not a little wonderful how he kept together; for there could hardly have been a whole bone in his body. His collar-bone, ribs *ad libitum*, and all his limbs had at various periods been broken. He rode recklessly, and being rather short-sighted, would go promiscuously at anything—so that his prolonged existence can only be attributed to the fact that he had been five years out of England. But of all troublesome parts of his person, his knee was decidedly the most touchy and useless; it was chronically ‘out;’ and though, after a series of wonderful performances, it was got ‘in’ again, and he would go limping about in graceful awkwardness, yet it was never certain that on the very slightest provocation it might not go ‘out’ again.

There were not wanting people who said that his knee was well or ill to suit his own convenience. That was a calumny. Still, it did vary a good deal, and there were various comments made at Enleigh—people will al-

ways be talking—when, just two days after Miss Dashwood's accident, Sir Digby discovered that his knee was 'out.' He had slipped on the ice, and in order to be ready for the hunting, when the frost should 'give,' it was really important that he should take care of himself now.

The large bow-window of Audrey's boudoir commanded the lake, and thither one of her brothers carried her every day, so that she could watch the skaters. She lay on the sofa, with her books or her work; and what more natural than that the gentleman, being lame too, should keep her company? He came with much circumstance and grand paraphernalia of capacious arm-chair, leg-rest, stick, books, papers, and what not. And although both of course regretted the skating, they resigned themselves with philosophical equanimity to their fate.

And all this time, though both were in Arcadia, no syllable of the language usually deemed proper to that enchanted land passed between them.

They talked over their friends and their prospects—over Laura especially (she was their constant theme); over Claude, and Harold Carew, whom the baronet pronounced decidedly ‘hit.’

And then Violet, blooming with health and spirits, would come in with Amy Erle, to give an account of the morning’s skating.

CHAPTER III.

THERE are breakages which can never be mended—idols which, once shattered, can never be restored. ‘Not all the king’s horses and all the king’s men can set Humpty-Dumpty up again,’ once he has thrown himself down. Nothing could ever bring back Laura’s absolute faith in Claude. He had himself broken and defaced his own beautiful image, which she had set up, with some feminine idealisation, it must be admitted, in her heart.

‘Nothing shatters life so completely, nothing so makes a desert of the world, as the discovery of the meanness of those in whom we have believed.’ Minds of a certain type sustain a greater shock from contact with want of generosity, with meanness or smallness of any kind, than from actual crime. Littleness

constitutes, in the estimation of such, the unpardonable sin.

Laura's whole moral nature shrank from Claude as he had revealed himself during the past six months. Circumstances might arise to awaken her pity for him; she could never respect or love him again in the old way. Ichabod was written on that beautiful dream of her youth. Now that Audrey could not, in consequence of her sprain, go to the Rectory, her friend had to come up to see her; but she always timed her visit so as to avoid the risk of meeting Claude.

One bright day, after Digby's knee was well enough to permit of his limping about again, and Audrey therefore did not see so much of him, she entreated Laura to stay to luncheon with her.

‘Do, dear; I feel so dull to-day, and there is no fear of Claude's coming. He is gone to Hillingdon, and won't be back till late.’

‘And why should Claude's presence prevent Laura's staying?’ asked that gentleman's voice close behind her.

Both girls started violently.

‘You come back, Claude?’ exclaimed his sister.

He came round, holding out his hand.

‘Laura, let us be friends. I can’t go on in this way any longer—never seeing you, and you avoiding me as you do. Life isn’t worth having.’

He had taken her hand in his firm grasp, and was looking at her, the old friendly light in his eyes—and genuine regret in them too, at their estrangement—the old magic in his voice.

‘Let us be friends, Laura,’ he repeated. ‘We have quarrelled long enough, and have both been miserable. I can answer for myself, at any rate, God knows.’

She tried to withdraw her hand, but he refused to release it.

‘Let my hand go,’ she said, not haughtily or angrily, but in a tone he could not disregard. ‘What do you mean by being friends?’ she continued gravely.

‘What do I mean? I mean that we should

be as we were before—as if this unfortunate quarrel had never been.’

‘That is quite impossible,’ she answered firmly.

‘And may I ask why?’ in a voice indicative of extreme surprise that she should show any hesitation in accepting his terms. ‘I was angry, and you were angry; in short, we quarrelled. I admit that my strong feeling on one point may have seemed to you unreasonable; but I withdraw all I said—everything—and ask you to resume our friendship as though that unhappy difference had never been. Will you not do so?’

‘No, Mr. Dashwood; it is impossible.’

‘Don’t call me Mr. Dashwood, Laura. It is preposterous between you and me. Why should it be impossible? Audrey will tell you, if she has not already done so, how grieved I have been at the whole thing. I came down here on purpose to make it all right between us, but you would not see me. I can’t do without you, Laura, that is the fact; so you have everything in your own

hands now. You shall do as you please, so that we are friends. That is all I ask. It is not like you to be unforgiving for a few hasty words spoken in a moment of disappointment,' he ended, seeing that her face did not soften.

'Disappointment at what?' she asked, as if repressing some rising anger.

'We won't go over old discussions,' he said gently. 'I have admitted that I made a mistake ; but I refuse to give you up, after all that has passed between us, without some better reason than your merely saying, "It is impossible."'

'You cannot give up what is not yours to give.'

'The best thing you have to give is mine, Laura ; you cannot deny that. You told me so once, and I am not likely to have forgotten it.'

When a proud sensitive woman has been led to confess her love, and has subsequently quarrelled with the object of it, it is unwise in him, if he wish to regain his influence, to remind her of the confession. He may be

very sure that she has not forgotten it ; he may be equally sure that she will resent being reminded of it.

At Claude's ill-judged observation the eloquent blood mounted even to Laura's forehead. She threw back her head with her accustomed gesture when angry.

‘And how did you value the gift?’ she exclaimed. ‘You led me to trust you as a woman trusts only once in her life, and then, because you believed that after such an avowal I could not or would not draw back, you let me see, plainly enough, that in your eyes my love was but a poor return for all you had to give.’

‘You do me grievous injustice there, Laura. I consider your love a gift beyond all price. It is my greatest pride that it is mine.’

‘It is not yours, and never can be,’ she said.

‘Not mine, Laura? I claim it as mine before all the world. You cannot take back in that way what you have once given.’

‘I cannot bring back to life what is dead.’

‘Dead!’ he exclaimed. ‘I will not believe it.’

She was so beautiful as she stood, with her burning colour, her eyes larger and darker from excitement, that his pride—everything—sank before the overwhelming desire to secure her for himself. He took her hand almost forcibly.

‘You are mine, Laura, and I refuse to give you up.’

‘I am not yours,’ she said firmly, freeing her hand by a sudden movement. ‘Nothing in this world would induce me to marry you. All that is at an end for ever. I should feel as if I were imprisoned for life,’ impetuously, as though the words were forced from her. ‘I am sorry to seem rude, Claude,’ noticing his mortified expression at her unflattering avowal; ‘but it is better to be plain. I would not make myself your wife for any consideration. We should both be miserable; you must see that we should.’

‘I see nothing of the sort—’ he began.

‘We differ on every single point,’ she went on vehemently. ‘It is altogether out of the question. Audrey, will you explain to him how it is that it can never be?’

‘I want no explanation from Audrey; I want it from you,’ he said passionately.

‘I have said all I can say. I can never be your wife. You will see yourself, in time, that my decision is wise; but even if you do not, I cannot alter it. Let us never renew the subject; it is too painful.’ And as if unable to endure any more, she abruptly quitted the room.

He stood looking after her, perfectly confounded, not having in the least expected such a result.

‘What on earth is the meaning of that?’ he exclaimed, turning to Audrey.

The latter had once thought that if ever she spoke on the subject of Laura and Claude’s treatment of her, she should not be able to refrain from a torrent of reproach; but now she could not find it in her heart to utter a word. He looked so miserable as he threw himself into a

chair beside her, his gray eyes darkened with grief and mortification, that her anger was changed into pity and sorrow.

‘Tell me at once. Is she going to marry Carew?’ he asked.

‘Not that I know of.’

‘Then what does it all mean? I went away a few months ago engaged to her.’

‘O Claude! how can you reasonably say anything of the kind? You had quarrelled as bitterly as two people could quarrel.’

‘And what are such quarrels worth? What is at the bottom of it, Audrey? Tell me.’

‘There is nothing to tell, beyond what she said herself,’ answered Audrey sadly.

He rose and walked up and down the room several times.

‘She finds Carew a better speculation, that is the simple explanation of the whole thing,’ he exclaimed bitterly at last.

‘Claude! you ought to be ashamed of yourself for saying so.’ Audrey’s forbearance was not proof against this aspersion on her

friend. 'When she loved and trusted you, you bargained with her, as aunt Eleanor says, like a huckster; and besides, how could you expect any girl to respect you when you stooped, because you were angry and disappointed, to make her the text of such an article as you wrote?'

'She knew nothing of that,' he said quickly.

'Of course she did. You know she always sees what you write.'

'Tell me what she said—every word.'

'She only said she hoped you felt the better for it. But, Claude, she was surprised and grieved, as I was, that you could stoop to do such a thing.'

'She had no right to assume either that I wrote it or that anything in it was an allusion to her.'

To this remark Audrey made no reply.

'And for a thing done in a hasty moment she throws me over?' he resumed after a pause.

'You threw her over, Claude, and with

very little ceremony too. I don't want to reproach you—reproaches do no good; and I am more grieved for the whole thing than I can say; but as you blame her, and talk about her “throwing you over” and finding Harold Carew “a better speculation,” I must defend her, and say that I don't think you see or feel how rudely—not to use a stronger term—you behaved to her the day you proposed, and ever since, in fact. Why have you never gone near the Rectory? If you had wished to make up the quarrel, it was your place to go and find Laura, not to wait till you met her by chance. Even a less spirited and proud girl than she is would resent such treatment. I would never speak to a man again who behaved so to me, I know that.'

He made no answer, but continued to stride up and down the room, a dark frown on his face. He was deeply mortified. There was no mistaking Laura's refusal. It had in it none of the *reculer pour mieux sauter*, but came straight from the heart; and the ring of

unconscious repulsion in the words, 'I should feel as if I were imprisoned for life,' stung him to the quick.

He had always held that if a woman once reject a man, it is a degradation to him to renew his offer to her; yet his love for this girl had been so overpowering, that he had for her sake stooped to this humiliation. That he did this entirely to please himself was a fact which did not at that moment occur to him; he only felt that she ought to have been grateful for his condescension; and as her scornful words and looks came back to his memory he broke into a torrent of invective against her, denouncing her implacability, her temper, her pride, her incapacity for anything like real love.

He went to London by that evening's train. The frost broke up soon after, and the last visitor left Enleigh. The next thing that was heard of Claude Dashwood was that he was engaged to Violet Ellis.

CHAPTER IV.

CLAUDE DASHWOOD was not the first man who has proposed in haste that he may repent at leisure. It cannot be said that there are many laws or social customs bearing hardly on men in these days ; but there is one point on which they certainly have somewhat severe measure dealt out to them. If a man has been led, either from some combination of circumstances, or even from an imprudent impulse, to engage himself to a girl between whom and himself a farther acquaintance shows that there are no real grounds of sympathy, no single condition likely to insure happiness, it is, if he be a gentleman, almost impossible for him to escape the consequences of his momentary want of discretion. Honour, so called, and public opinion compel him to a life of miser-

able bondage to a woman whom he may find it impossible either to love or respect ; and he finds little sympathy in his misfortune. ' He has no one to blame but himself ; ' ' He ought to have known his own mind . ' Very true ; he is, nevertheless, often deserving of much pity.

Having once engaged himself to her, it would have been an impossibility for Claude to escape a marriage with Violet. The Ellises always went to town shortly after Christmas. There he met Violet, and, under the influence of the strong emotion of anger excited in his mind by Laura's rejection, made her an offer of his hand. Is it at all necessary to say that she accepted it, or to dwell on the joy of the Ellis family at one of their members having at length captured a fish? Yet why their joy should be a subject of mirth it is not easy to see. The girls had been brought up to think fishing for men the great end of their existence ; and when one fair angler succeeded, was it not natural that her friends should rejoice with her ?

The news of Claude's engagement fell like a heavy blow on every one at Enleigh. Even Mrs. Elliott was shocked at its suddenness. Charlie and Audrey were in despair.

'Who is to tell Laura?' asked the former, his kindly face much troubled at the thought of the pain the announcement would bring to her. He walked restlessly from place to place all day, unable to settle to anything, devising with his sister a thousand schemes for breaking the fact delicately to Mrs. Erle, who would be, he considered, the fittest person to communicate it to her daughter.

Laura, however, was already aware of the engagement. Violet Ellis had written to her, informing her of it, by the same post which brought Claude's letter to Enleigh.

'And Samuel came no more to see Saul until the day of his death: nevertheless Samuel mourned for Saul.'

Is there on record a more pathetic or heart-felt expression of disappointed hope, and of the love which survives belief and trust?

Claude Dashwood would never henceforth,

to the day of his death, be *the one* to Laura Erle; nevertheless she mourned for him.

He who had been the embodiment of the poetry and romance of her girlish life could not suddenly be blotted out of it without leaving a hideous blank. All her tenderest and brightest recollections clustered round him. The memory of the many days and hours which his presence had gladdened for her was

‘the shrine

Of pleasant thoughts soft as the scent of flowers;’

his unvarying kindness to her in former days adding tenfold to the poignancy of her regrets now.

During the autumn and winter months, when Enleigh used to be full of fashionable fine ladies to whom he was bound to be attentive, he had never for a moment let her feel herself neglected. No matter who was present, he did not forget her, or disregard her tastes or wishes. In spite of his gusts of temper he was associated with the happiest hours of her life. His gayest smiles, his softest

words, had always been reserved for her. How could she live without him?

‘Habit and association — these are the plummetts which carry the links of love so far down into the depths of human affection, that when they are torn up again, they bring with them broken shells and lifeless flowers, which till then beautified the hidden sanctums lurking under the waves of life.’

Tearing his image from her heart had been like tearing away a part of herself. But it is better to go through life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to drag out an existence which is at best but a death in life. Nevertheless, it is possible to preserve even that higher life at too great a cost. To maim ourselves for a noble end may be well; to maim others is not well. Laura felt now that she had been much to blame in her dealings with Claude; she had been too hasty, too proud, too little forbearing.

There are people who may be best described as human volcanoes. When possessed by any strong feeling—whether of love, hate,

anger, or admiration—they fume and fret, are, in fact, altogether beside themselves, till they have given expression to the feeling. Its forcible repression destroys their powers for the time, but once they have relieved their souls by speech they relapse into their normal state of quiescence, and are themselves not unfrequently astonished afterwards at the intensity of their emotions, and ashamed, it may be, of the explosive vehemence they have displayed.

Laura Erle was one of these volcanoes. Till she had spoken to Claude, she had been in a fever of grief and anger; but having once expressed herself to him, the vehemence of her emotion subsided, and long before she heard of his engagement, she condemned herself severely for the curtness and abruptness of her refusal. That he had been ungenerous was not, she felt, a justification for a want of generosity on her part.

She could never have married him, but she might have told him so gently, and in such a way as not to have driven him into a

marriage with Violet Ellis. The announcement of his engagement, following so soon on his passionate protestations to herself, overpowered her. If it was a blow to the Dashwoods, it struck her with remorse, almost terror. To what a life of misery had she not been instrumental in condemning him! For she could not imagine him happy with Violet, though personally she liked the latter, not experiencing towards her any of that moral repulsion which Audrey felt.

Violet herself had no suspicion that there had ever been 'anything' between Claude and Laura. Had she had any such, she would not have written to her announcing her engagement, being too good-natured to derive satisfaction from giving pain to another.

She innocently wished every one to be as happy as she herself was at that moment; and one of her first thoughts, with a house of her own in prospect, had been, 'I'll have Laura Erle to stay with me.'

Laura showed the letter to her mother after breakfast, when she found herself alone

with her. Mrs. Erle read it while her child stood opposite, leaning against the table and watching her. Both were silent for some time, then Laura said:

‘Mamma, do you think Violet will be able to make him happy at all?’

‘God only can tell, my dear one. It will depend greatly on how he manages her. She has much that is good in her.’

There was a long pause; then Laura spoke again:

‘Mother, it almost seems as if all the things Claude has said to me about—about liking me, and all that, and as if all I felt for him, give me a sort of right in him somehow; as if I ought to warn him against doing such a foolish act as marrying Violet just now—so soon.’

‘My dear!’ exclaimed the mother hastily, ‘you have no such right. Those things cannot be done.’

‘I know, mamma; don’t be uneasy; I’m not going to make a quixotic tilt against conventionality; but, all the same, I feel as if no

one has such a right in Claude as I have; as if no one could understand him so well; and I do think it is wrong of him—dreadful—to marry poor little Violet so soon, just after—after—oh, mamma, it would be just as if I were to marry some one with my heart so horribly—horribly full of Claude as it is now!’ pressing her hands tightly together, as if to repress her strong emotion, and drive back the tears that crowded into her eyes. ‘I wonder if he feels as I do?’ she ended, walking to the window and then back to her mother.

‘He is angry, darling, and that drowns sorrow.’

‘I know it, mamma; but the anger won’t remain, and the sorrow does.’

Seeing her grief, Mrs. Erle may be pardoned for feeling some regret that her daughter and Claude had not been able satisfactorily to arrange their differences. It was not in maternal human nature altogether to drive out the recollection of the gentleman’s many qualifications as a son-in-law. Mrs. Erle was not,

in any blamable sense, a worldly woman ; but she had suffered much from poverty, and knew how a continuous fight with it crushes the energies, unless in a few dominant natures, which will always be superior to all circumstances ; and she had no stray gleams of genius struggling in her, and resenting imperiously all attempts at suppression. The sympathy and insight of strong affection enabled her to enter in some degree into her child's feelings ; it remained true, nevertheless, that on this morning she did deeply regret that any difference should have occurred to prevent Laura from occupying the position now held by Violet.

The girl, quick to perceive every change of mood in those about her, was at once conscious of this.

‘ You are sorry, I see, mamma,’ she said, kneeling before her ; ‘ you hoped the thing would arrange itself somehow.’

‘ My darling, I would not have influenced you for the world ; you must be the best judge of your own happiness.’

‘Still you wish I could have married him?’

‘My child, it is only—I hope you may never regret it. I have suffered so much from want of means, Laura, and he was so fond of you, you could have influenced him to what you pleased. A wife’s influence is so strong, dear.’

‘But it ought not to be a thing of influence at all. O mamma, I see you don’t understand a bit! I was afraid you wouldn’t!’—starting up and standing before her. ‘Don’t you know that line?’

“ Zum höchsten Dasein immerfort zu streben ?”

Every one has a natural right to do that—women as well as men—and Claude thinks and says I have not. He wanted to be my highest Dasein himself, he always would want it, and I could not bear it—not now even, sorry as I am for him;’ pushing back her hair off her flushed face.

Poor Mrs. Erle! It was a long time since she had read *Faust*. To cultivate literature on a little oatmeal is, no doubt, a beautiful and

noble thing; but it is one which will be found easier of accomplishment when the cultivator has only himself or herself to provide for. A number of small mouths, all wanting oatmeal too, does distract the attention sadly, as Mrs. Erle had found; and it may be that she had but a partial comprehension now of the line her daughter brought back to her memory. But she comprehended clearly enough the look of pain in the young eyes, the quivering expression of distress round the dimpled lips. She rose, and putting her arms round her child, said:

‘My darling, I would not have you think I regret your decision for one moment. Whatever is for your happiness must please me.’

She kissed tenderly the burning face, and Laura, drawn hither and thither by conflicting feelings, her struggling genius on the one side, her love and sorrow for Claude on the other, laid her head on her mother’s shoulder, and gave way to a burst of tears.

Mrs. Erle never regretted Claude Dashwood, even in thought, again. She could not

but stand loyally by this beautiful yet incomprehensible thing which she had brought into the world; but she was led to reflect much on the 'contrariness' of things—on the blunders committed by Mother Nature sometimes; or if Nature cannot blunder, who does? Had John only been Laura, and Laura John! John in petticoats would have been such an admirable wife for Claude; and Laura—it was difficult to imagine her otherwise than in petticoats, the creature was so altogether womanly; and the mother's heart was filled with thoughts which were not, perhaps, quite charitable towards the man who had failed to appreciate or comprehend her child.

'It breaks my heart to think of it!' exclaimed Audrey when she came later in the day to impart the news to her friend. 'I do wish you could have decided differently, dear.'

Laura had nothing to offer in reply, save excuses that she could not help it, and vague hopes that things might turn out better than they expected.

‘ Claude will make Violet’s shortcomings as a wife the text for a series of articles on the turpitude of women, and marital suffering therefrom.’

That was the only severe remark she made.

Shortly before the marriage was to take place, Claude came down to Enleigh to make arrangements about his horses. It was spring-time, and such beauty was bursting into life on every side, that God Himself seemed to be walking in glory round the world, revelling in the work of His own hands, revealing Himself in leaping mountain streams, in opening leaves and buds, in the songs of a thousand birds, in the multiplied hum of busy insect crowds.

He or she must be very much in love indeed who does not, as the day of marriage draws nigh, look back with some fond regret on the fast-vanishing hours of freedom ! Especially must this be so in the case of a young man to whom life has been, on the whole, a pleasant pastime. Few such, if truth were

spoken, would not confess to sundry pangs, sacred to the memory of happy bachelor liberty. It is to be hoped, of course, that the image of the Adela or Blanche, for whom the liberty is abandoned, comes as a consoling one ere the regrets become too poignant. 'The dearest little girl in the world' is worth giving up something for.

Claude had no such consolation as he stood on the lawn at Enleigh, leaning on the railing, as he had done nearly a year before, when he had proposed to his sister that they should go and see Laura. A farther acquaintance with Violet had not convinced him that she was worth the sacrifice he was making for her. What would his life be, tied down to the domestic hearth through long years to come, with such a vis-à-vis?

As he came to know more of the Ellis family, he began to experience some of that repulsion which his sister felt for their low moral tone. It was not that they ever did anything the world would condemn, but they had no standard except the world's standard;

and Claude, though accepting that standard as, on the whole, good enough for himself, yet, in some unconscious way, acknowledged that there was a higher one, and thought that women especially should regulate their actions by it. He never put this into words; it influenced him nevertheless.

But whatever he saw, it was now too late to repent. He had put his hand to the matrimonial plough, and could not draw back. He told himself this with bitterness of heart, as he stood, this glorious spring afternoon, taking his last free look on his old home. He took stock of his life heretofore, and could not say he had done well; yet he blamed not himself, but Laura. She it was who had driven him to the desolate spot on which he now stood.

As he was thus thinking, she suddenly appeared before him. He raised his hat as she advanced, with the half-timid graceful air which he knew so well as distinctive of one of her fits of extreme shyness. But she spoke calmly, having schooled herself to that effort.

‘Claude, I hear you are going away to-morrow; and as you did not come to me, I have come—will you let me?—to wish you all possible happiness in your marriage; all that one human being can wish for another.’ She held out her hand, which he took with a look of cold hard misery on his face.

‘Thank you; you are very kind,’ he returned, in a brief stern tone.

‘I wanted to say another thing,’ she went on rapidly: ‘for so many, many years, Claude’—with a strong quiver in her voice—‘you were so kind to me, I must thank you. It seems dreadful to me to break with all the old life in this way, and that you won’t believe how much I care for your happiness. If you would only say you forgive me, Claude.’

‘Forgive you? Never, so help me God! Such words as “forgive” and “happiness” are a mockery from your lips! You have blighted my life, and then you come and ask me to forgive you!’

He passed abruptly into the shrubbery, the little gate of which was near.

Laura stood as if turned to stone, while flowers were springing all round beneath her feet, and the birds sang glad songs of love and joy. She was unconscious of everything, save that dull aching pain at her heart, always craving for one word of kindness from him.

So deep was her sorrow for him—so keen her regret for the ungracious way in which she had rejected his last offer—that it had seemed to her impossible to let him leave Enleigh without some expression of goodwill on her part; but as he had neither announced his marriage to her, nor made any attempt to see her or her mother—he had met Mr. Erle one day, and informed him of his engagement—it was not easy to know what to do. On this afternoon, as she was passing through the shrubbery, she saw him standing by the railing, that look of gloomy misery on his face; and, following an irresistible impulse, she had gone up and spoken to him.

When he left her she stood for some minutes, and then turned mechanically for comfort to that refuge which never fails, which

is sure when all else is false—her mother's love.

‘He said I had blighted his life, mamma; that he would never forgive me!’

‘God help you both!’ answered the mother.

CHAPTER V.

ON the whole, that week he spent at Enleigh before his marriage was the most miserable of Claude Dashwood's life. There was always the terrible lurking question, 'Is it possible to get out of it now, even at the last moment?', and always the same uncompromising answer, 'No.' There was Audrey's miserable face, and Charlie's open disapproval. The latter was so angry that he at first refused to be present at the wedding; pleading that he must take the two children abroad at once to their mother, who was wearying for a sight of them.

This evoked a domestic storm. Mrs. Ellis had settled, the very moment she heard of the engagement, that Eveline and Adela (Charlie's children) were to be bridesmaids, and she would resent highly their premature departure. Charlie, of course, bent his head

to the blast; he would let the children stay, but would not himself be present. However, on this point too he yielded, though not before he and his brother had had, almost for the first time in their lives, high words together.

Charlie felt it his duty to tell Claude that he totally disapproved of the match; and that it was, moreover, a poor beginning of domestic bliss to marry one girl while his whole heart was given to another. Being impulsive and energetic, he performed this duty with less discretion than was, perhaps, desirable under the circumstances, and Claude was deeply incensed.

He answered that he had a perfect right to please himself, must be the best judge of his own affairs, and would not permit any one's interference. He would take all his horses and dogs away from Enleigh, and never again put foot across the threshold.

That threat cut Charlie to the heart. He had always been chivalrously anxious that his brother and sister and Mrs. Elliott should look on Enleigh as their country home as

entirely now as they had done in his father's lifetime. Audrey effected a reconciliation. It is almost impossible that a quarrel between brothers should be permanent, if there exist a sister equally attached to both; but the storm was violent while it lasted, and left its traces in increased depression and misery on Claude's part, though Charlie yielded everything. He would go to the wedding, and would even see if it might be possible to bring his wife to London for it.

The intimacy between the Dashwoods and Erles had been so great that the two families had been like one; and now that this intimacy was broken off, Enleigh was no longer the same place. With Laura, Claude felt that the sunshine was gone. Announcing his marriage to Mr. Erle was a trial too. The latter was very fond of the two young men whom he had seen grow up from boyhood, and who had always been affectionately respectful to himself. Claude as a son-in-law would have been very welcome to him; but then, if Claude would not make his Laura happy! Altogether

the Rector's feelings were divided, and when Claude, constrained and nervous, told him he was engaged to Violet, Mr. Erle could hardly find voice enough to wish him God speed.

It was a time of pain to all concerned; and Laura felt keenly, as many another girl has felt, that though in theory she may be free to reject or accept a husband as she pleases, yet that in real practical life it needs no little courage and resolution to act on the theory, especially if she be portionless and the gentleman's purse larger than his merit in her estimation, or if her refusal spring from causes not very intelligible to ordinary observers. Even Audrey's sincere affection was not quite proof against some soreness of feeling with Laura for her rejection of her brother. In words she commended her, but the sight of Claude's miserable face always induced a secret remark, 'she might have trusted him and forgiven him,' so true is it that nothing can really 'break the tie of blood.'

'I think some people are born to be unfortunate,' she said to Laura one day. 'Every-

thing seems to go wrong with us. I know nothing I ever wish for happens. I did so long to have you for a sister, Laura.'

Laura could say little, except that she was grieved, and that they must try to make friends with Violet, so as to induce her to study Claude's happiness as much as possible.

The night before Claude left for London, he went, as he had been in the habit of doing for years, into his sister's room to wish her good-night.

'O Claude! can nothing be done?' she exclaimed, throwing her arms round him.

'Nothing,' he answered. 'It is too late.'

Hitherto he had invariably repudiated the assumption that there was anything to do; but at that last moment there was no disguise between them. She put her head down on his shoulder and sobbed bitterly; then he told her he had seen Laura.

'And what did she say?' she questioned eagerly.

'Wished me joy, and asked me to forgive her,' with a bitter execration. 'Such words

were a mockery from her, and I told her so. She never really cared for me; she thought Carew a better speculation from the first. So it is as well as it is.'

'Have you told Violet about it, darling?'

'No; why should I?'

'I think you ought, dear.'

'It is no affair of hers.'

'All that concerns you is her affair now, darling.'

He made a half-promise that he would tell her, but never found an opportune moment for doing so. Instinctively he shrank from letting her know aught of that beautiful dream to which there had come such a bitter waking.

He went to London the next day; Mrs. Elliott, all-triumphant, Audrey, and the other members of the family followed soon after, and there was a gay wedding and much rejoicing on the part of the bride's relatives, and on that of the beautiful little bride herself.

The poor bridegroom was less joyful, and

was so absent and nervous that he forgot to order the carriage which was to take him and his newly-acquired property to the station, thereby necessitating a departure in a quiet ordinary brougham, devoid of favours, grays, postillions, or anything, in short, that could make it worth a girl's while to become a bride; and Violet was terribly grieved and disappointed.

Ladies with daughters still on hand congratulated Mrs. Ellis warmly on having got rid of one of hers,—‘the Dashwoods, such a charming family to marry into,’—but remarked to each other significantly that they ‘hoped Violet would be happy.’

‘Mrs. Ellis is, of course, glad to get a daughter off; but I should be uncommonly sorry to see a child of mine married to a man with such a temper. Did you see how he looked at her when she said something to him about having forgotten to order the carriage?’

Every one observed that the bridegroom's sister cried as much as if she had herself been

the bride, and several people had heard something of a prior attachment on his part.

And so ended that page in the lives of Claude and Laura. A fresh point of departure for each had come. Old things were passed away, all things were become new, except memory—that always remains—and regrets for the old, old days, which, however, people would do well to stifle;

‘For violets plucked, the sweetest showers
Will ne’er make grow again.’

Other violets, indeed, may bloom ; but they are not the blossoms on which we once gazed with delight, not because they were more beautiful, but because they were the first, fresh with the dew of youth.

‘When will return the glory of your prime ?
No more—oh, never more !’

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. CLAUDE DASHWOOD was now in possession of those many desirable things which had once been offered to Laura Erle, and which she had rejected for the sake of certain immaterial considerations—poor equivalents, it may perhaps be thought, to an impecunious maiden, for a house and a carriage and a husband.

The house was certainly pretty enough to be a temptation to any one, and its new mistress looked pretty too, as she stood in the dining-room one sunny morning before breakfast, talking to her sister-in-law, Audrey Dashwood, while awaiting the arrival of the master of the establishment.

She was complaining bitterly of the enormities of her maid ; for Violet was one of those people in whose eyes servants have neither heart nor feeling, nor any capacity of

fatigue. She almost invariably began the day by finding fault with her maid, appealing in piteous tones to the company during breakfast for their sympathy with her in her sufferings from this enemy of her peace.

This sympathy Audrey never readily gave, and Violet's demand for it had always irritated her.

'I do dislike to hear a woman incessantly railing at her wretched maid,' she had exclaimed one day to Laura Erle. 'If the poor creature does now and then forget one of Violet's thousand ribbons, is it a crime or a matter of public importance?'

Violet had always been aggrieved at Audrey's want of acquiescence in her objurgations. It is true the latter never spoke in favour of the maid; but some word of extenuation she would occasionally offer, and that Violet found it hard to tolerate.

On this morning she was still pointing out some infinitesimal fault in the construction of her dress when Claude came in. She turned to him at once.

‘Now, Claude, isn’t it tiresome of Barton? Just look at my dress! It makes me look like a sack round my waist.’

In the old Enleigh days, when Violet had made this appeal, spanning her dainty girdle with her hands,—not at all to win his admiration, but in real annoyance,—Claude had always looked amused, and used to laugh, encouraging her to go on pouring forth her complaints.

Some men seem to take an absolute delight in the silliness of silly women, fostering and abetting it. Is it that by doing so they hope to keep up the tradition of their own superiority? Whatever was the reason, Claude had certainly encouraged Violet’s in those early days; now he appeared to be less fascinated.

‘What should you say if Poole sent you a coat made like this?’ went on his bride, still appealing to him.

‘Let us have breakfast, Violet,’ he said, taking up his letters.

‘You are so unkind and stupid, Claude.

You don't care a bit about my dress being spoiled.'

'Is it spoiled? I don't see. Why not have another maid, if Barton is so bad?'

'Because another would most likely be worse. They are all alike. I do think if I was a maid I would take more trouble about my work.'

They sat down to breakfast.

'What are we going to do to-night?' asked Violet, as she poured out the tea. 'Shall we go to the play, or what?'

'Couldn't we stay at home?' suggested Claude. 'It is Audrey's last evening.'

'It is so awfully dull,' responded the bride. 'It will be like Paris over again. Audrey, you have no idea how moped we were. I think wedding tours ought to be abolished. Weren't we bored, Claude?' in a tone of the most genial *bonhomie*.

'I am sorry you found it so dull,' responded the young husband, too polite to answer in the affirmative.

'Don't say "you," say "we;" for I am

sure you were bored too. I know you looked it, and no wonder. Why people who are going to spend the rest of their natural lives together should begin by giving full scope to their capacity for boring each other passes my poor comprehension. So far from going off alone, they ought, as Dick Wilmot says, to get some one to help them to bear up against the awful thought that they are absolutely tied to each other for life. If it hadn't been for the shops, I think I should have died.'

'I'm glad you had some consolation,' said Claude in a tone which was beginning to be significant to Violet's ear.

'Would it be proper for me to gush?' she exclaimed immediately in a provocative way which would have amused a less touchy man than Claude. 'O Audrey! so sweet, you know, and romantic, to have dear, dear Claude all to myself, and for dear Claude to have me, his little Violet, all to himself, for weeks and weeks and weeks together! Wasn't it sweet, Claude?' clasping her hands and casting a languishing look at him out of her blue eyes.

‘As we have got to go on together for the rest of our lives, Violet—’ began Claude gravely.

‘We should take it easy at first. Precisely what I say,’ interrupted the lady, quite unabashed by his sternness. ‘Claude thinks I don’t gush enough, Audrey;’ relapsing into her natural tone. ‘He is horrified because I call things by their real names. I see no harm in saying we were both bored in Paris, and were glad to get back. We are none the less good friends for it; we couldn’t help it. But Claude would like me to say we were in Paradise. We quarrelled at last, so then it got better.’

‘The remedy must have been worse than the disease. What did you quarrel about?’

‘Never mind now,’ said Claude.

‘Why shouldn’t I tell her? There is no secret.’ Then, turning to Audrey, ‘I wanted to bring home a present for Laura Erle, and as she and Claude were such old friends I thought it would be so nice if he and I got one together for her. I had set my heart on

a chain and locket with our photographs in it,—I noticed that she had such a rubbishy little locket on a ribbon round her neck,—but he wouldn't help me, and was so disagreeable and cross about it.'

'I didn't want to prevent your giving her any mortal thing you pleased.'

But in truth his conduct on this matter had seemed very ungracious to his young wife.

He had not, despite his promises to Audrey, spoken to her of that passage in the lives of Laura and himself, and the longer he put off doing so, the harder he found it to introduce the subject. Violet's frequent mention of her irritated him inexpressibly; for he could not help contrasting the present, which was boring him to extinction, with that present as it might have been, had Laura, not Violet, been his companion. With that charming combination of tenderness and fire he would not have been dull. With what delight would he have decked her beautiful neck and arms with ornaments! He had looked forward with pride to loading her

with gifts, and to receiving her smiles and caresses of half-tender, half-playful thanks. He felt no pleasure in giving to Violet; she had so much, in the first place; in the next, his gifts were all taken as a matter of course and business, so that he had none of the exquisite poetic delight in giving which he had experienced on the rare occasions when he had ventured on presenting Laura with any little offering.

And now, how could he take part in giving her a locket with his photograph in it? He refused to let his name be associated with the gift at all; and Violet, unaware of the reason, thought him ungracious and disagreeable, and told him so with a frankness which, even in those early days, he resented in a wife.

‘Wasn’t it ill-natured of him?’ she said to Audrey now.

‘I’m sure he didn’t mean to be ill-natured. I suppose he thought it would come better from you.’

‘Exactly,’ muttered Claude.

‘Still, I think he might have helped me when I asked him,’ persisted Violet. ‘I could have got a much handsomer present if he had joined me.’

‘Good God, Violet! Did I prevent your spending any sum you liked?’

‘You told me the chain and locket cost too much money, and that if I went on at that rate, I should soon have nothing left; so I bought quite a rubbishy little thing for her.’

‘If I said that, I didn’t mean it,’ said Claude, with a rather uneasy glance at Audrey. He could not bear her to think him guilty of grudging Laura a present. In one sense he had not grudged it. He was very generous, as a rule; but little shades of ignoble feeling creep in very insidiously. That same fibre in his nature which made him so conscious of the many good things he had to bestow on a poor wife, made him feel some unwillingness that Laura should benefit through him, when she had refused to yield herself up to him entirely. Had she become his wife all he had was at her disposal. She had not

done so, and why should Violet take her a handsome present? Something like that was the sentiment, but so latent that he had not felt conscious of it, or ashamed, till dread of Audrey's disapproval showed it in its real deformity.

There are people in whom the good in others finds small response, on whom it produces no pleasurable effect. Claude did not in the least appreciate or even notice his young wife's generous thought for one less gifted than herself with the world's good things; nor was Audrey as just to Violet in this respect as she ought to have been.

Claude left the table, looking gloomy and miserable, and Audrey's heart sank at the specimen of his married life which she had seen.

She had been staying with him and Violet for some time, and was now going abroad with Mrs. Elliott to join Charlie and his wife, while Claude and his bride went to Oaklands for the autumn, to the inexpressible joy of the latter, who looked forward with rapture

to getting among her own people again, and into her father's house.

It was delightful to be Mrs. Claude Dashwood, and she really was proud of her husband's handsome looks and stately bearing, if only he would have been a degree more cheerful. But she missed the gay family circle, the unfailing good-humour of her own home.

Yet, mindful of the wisdom contained in certain proverbs, she would not let any one there guess that she had found a flaw in the fish she had captured with so much labour, or that the marriage for which she had striven so earnestly was not altogether a paradisiacal affair.

To Laura she was less reticent.

The day after her arrival at Oaklands she drove over to Smedston to present that gift which had caused so many heart-burnings, and afterwards the two, sitting together in Laura's bedroom, fell into very confidential discourse.

'Their goodness will be the death of me, that will be the end of it,' said Violet at last.

‘You see, Laura, I’m not fit for heaven yet, nor the company of the saints. I like the sinners best.’

‘I should never have thought of calling Claude or Audrey saints.’

‘We always used to talk of St. Audrey, long before I ever dreamed of marrying Claude. Perhaps what I mean, though, is not so much their goodness as their sham, as I call it—Claude’s especially.’

‘O Violet!’

‘Now, Laura, don’t say “O Violet!” as if you believed in shams too. Isn’t it all sham when Claude talks to me about the Bible?’

‘I don’t call the Bible a sham,’ said Laura gravely.

‘Of course not, dear; but what I mean is a sham, as I’ll tell you. We quarrelled this morning; he wanted me to do something that I wouldn’t, and he talked a lot of what St. Clare calls “rot,” and got the Bible to prove to me something about my husband ruling over me. That is what I call a sham,

because Claude doesn't believe any of the beginning of the Bible himself, I know; so it is all stuff his picking out little bits to frighten me with; and they don't frighten me, for I don't believe it either; and then he is horrified when I say so. He was quite shocked because I told him he talked "rot;"' laughing at the recollection. 'You see, he is quite different from the sort of men I have been used to,' she went on in a puzzled way. 'He wants me to go to church twice on Sundays, a thing I never did in my life, though he doesn't go himself. All that is what I call the Dashwood sham;' and with a freedom altogether surprising and somewhat painful to Laura, whose ideas on certain subjects were perhaps old-fashioned, she proceeded to discuss Claude's character and disposition as they unfolded themselves day by day to her. 'I don't know what to make of him sometimes,' she ended. 'How should you manage about his temper, now, if you were me?'

Laura felt much sympathy for the poor

little thing, wishing she had had a more experienced adviser than herself.

‘Why don’t you consult Mrs. Ellis, dear?’ she said.

‘My best of Lauras! I wouldn’t say a word to them at home for worlds. They think I’m having my innings now; and so I am, of course, and you mustn’t fancy Claude isn’t nice to me, and all that. He is awfully good to me, he really is, and is always wanting to know what he can do for me, and giving me things; only—oh! I suppose it is natural one should feel strange at first;’ shaking back her head to drive out of her pretty blue eyes some unmistakable tears, the effects of she hardly knew what vague disappointment. ‘After all, when you come to think of it, what a thing it is to be set down with a person you know so little of! Till a girl is actually married, she can’t conceive how little she knew of a man’s character really.’

‘But, Violet dear, I’m as certain as I can be of anything in the world, that Claude will do his best to make you happy.’

‘Of course, dear, and I am happy, awfully happy, really, and you must promise me never to say a word of what I have told you to any one. I just asked you as you have known Claude for so long. Now when are you coming over to Oaklands?’

‘Oh, not at all, dear; it is so far,’ said Laura, dreading a meeting with Claude.

‘Surely you could ride or drive?’

Laura’s rides were things of the past.

‘I have so much to do. Can’t you come over to me? We can talk so much better here?’

That was a happy thought, and Violet went away promising to renew the visit in a few days.

CHAPTER VII.

BUT Laura, though she had failed to secure a husband and a house in London, was not left without compensation.

There are pleasures so pure, so unalloyed by any taint of earthly dross, that they compensate for a lifetime of suffering. Such a one Laura experienced when she was, through her own earnings, enabled to help her father in replacing the money he had paid for John. To do this had lately been the great aim of the old man's life. 'If I only knew that was safe for your mother, I could say, "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace,"' he had confessed one day to his daughter.

Mr. Erle's birthday had always been observed as a fête in the family. From earliest infancy each of his children had on that occa-

sion presented him with some little gift in the morning, after prayers, and while awaiting the arrival of breakfast.

Mr. Erle always shared the family joy on his own birthday. 'There was, after all, something worth living for,' he would say to his wife, when fresh from the embraces and congratulations of these young creatures, 'and if the children were an anxiety, they were also a blessing, and they were good children on the whole; the boys steady' (poor John's delinquencies were happily forgotten at such periods), 'the girls tender and affectionate.'

On the anniversary in question, anxious though he was on account of his wife's future, he cheered up wonderfully as the little gifts, very worthless in themselves, were piled up round his plate, and clear young voices wished him many happy returns of the day.

For a while he forgot his cares under the genial sunshine of this affection, lingering over the breakfast table to indulge in reminiscences of the many past celebrations of his

nativity recollected by his numerous sons and daughters. Each one had some story of the first he or she remembered.

At last he rose to go into his study, feeling brighter and more hopeful than he had felt for some time. Arrived there, he stood looking admiringly at an oil-painting—the only one in the room—which he had bought in Rome long years before, when he had been a hopeful man on the threshold of life, not the broken-down father of children whose heritage was starvation.

Whenever his spirits revived a little he always stood to look at this picture, in which he was wont to declare he could, every time he looked, see ever-increasing beauties, and when he felt particularly happy, he would take out his silk pocket-handkerchief and rub the surface of the picture and polish it, his face beaming with an expression of artistic contentment befitting the possessor of such a treasure. He rubbed his picture till it shone again on this especial morning.

As he was standing before it, his head a

little on one side, in pleased contemplation, his mouth compressed, the handkerchief still in his hand, the door opened, and the bright face of his daughter Laura presented itself.

‘ May I come in, papa ? ’

‘ Come in, my child, ’ said the Rector, in the tone of tenderness in which he always addressed her.

He sat down at his table. She placed herself on his knee, and hiding her face on his white head, put into his hands the money she had been saving up for some time, saying it was her birthday present to him. He did not quite understand at first, but when he did, words would be as inadequate to describe his sensations as they were to express them at that moment. He could not speak for some time; he could only cover the girl’s face with kisses, his eyes full of tears.

Claude and his narrow prejudices were all forgotten by her then; or rather, they were not forgotten, but they sank into utter insignificance before the supreme happiness of that moment. It must be admitted that Mr. Erle

had found the idea of her money-earning capacities difficult of assimilation at first. When it was brought home to him, surprise had for many weeks been the predominant quality of his mind. Had any one thrown doubt on his girl's practical ability, he would, justly, have scouted such an one. He acknowledged daily her use in the parish ; she was his right hand, better than any curate save that she could not actually take part in the service ; she managed the choir, the schools ; she taught her brothers and sisters — the equal of his 'little Laura' was not to be found. But somehow his Laura as a money-earning animal was altogether a novel conception.

Had such an unlikely circumstance occurred as the presentation of a cheque, the fruit of his own labours, by Mr. John Erle to his progenitor, the latter would have been as highly surprised as he would have been gratified ; but the amazement would have arisen from totally different causes.

Had Laura been a man, indeed ! Men have a knack of picking up information ; they

go about, and who knows what they see and do? But his Laura!

Altogether it was mysterious, and well calculated to puzzle a father. What enormous, yet unsuspected potentialities might there not be all around him—in women, for example! From that day Mr. Erle, hitherto a strong Conservative, developed tendencies which might lead him to accept or welcome any amount of Radical change.

That great wave of change which was passing over the world,—he had held it to be the part of every good man to resist it to the utmost of his power; but when the wave rolls such a beautiful and precious thing to your feet, does not Providence mean you to learn something by that?

CHAPTER VIII.

VIOLET'S visit was the first break that had come for some time in Laura's life.

The intelligent reader has already perceived that the latter was far from being one of those young ladies, patterns of propriety and perfection, who were wont to be held up as models to rising womanhood; so very good were they that the only wonder is how their unfortunate belongings, the male portion of them especially, survived so much excellence. They never tired of going to church, getting up at cock-crow for the purpose (one model sprang out of bed the very moment she was called, at a quarter to five on a winter morning, and read the psalms and lessons there and then, her devotions not at all disturbed, apparently, by any compunction for having required the unfortunate housemaid to rise at such an abnormal hour); they reformed

on high Anglican principles every soul coming within their influence, their noblest ambition being to marry an apostolical-looking stick who snubbed them outrageously, and whose snubbings they accepted with meekness, as their appointed portion ; for they were, above all things, submissive ; were unconscious of rights (one trembles to think how shocked they would have been at asserting them), and were never so happy as when they were being thoroughly well trampled upon.

Truly, they were inimitable creatures ; but human nature, being weak, is apt to quail before the contemplation of such perfection, and to indulge in some ungodly hankerings after a society from which the lay element has not been altogether eliminated.

Laura was not one of these models. Many people will have already pronounced her altogether a brand, especially in that matter of her predilection for the male sex.

In spite of her numerous resources in herself she found the spring and summer after Claude's marriage dull and trying.

Enleigh was shut up, Mrs. Elliott and Audrey having gone abroad at once instead of returning there after the season; and the want of the usual society made a great blank at the Rectory. Laura missed especially the companionship of the gentlemen, with whom she had always been in the habit of mixing on terms of frank intimacy.

There are women who seem to be able to go through life very happily without ever associating much with men, without desiring their society, or deriving any pleasure from it; but Laura was not one of these, and she found existence, deprived of a strong masculine infusion, not only unutterably dull but wholly incomplete. Violet's visit had given her much to think about, but she saw little more of her; for the day after her first call came a letter from Lady Emily Carew's maid to Mrs. Erle, saying that her lady was very ill and had expressed an urgent wish to have Miss Erle with her, if her mother could spare her. Laura started at once for Melbury, and found her friend suffering from an attack of

low fever—nothing the least infectious, as the latter was anxious to impress on her, but likely to be tedious.

‘And, my dear girl, I did long so for you. You see, good Scott is devoted to me ; there could not be a better maid or nurse ; but then she is not like a friend. Ah, if I had only had a daughter ! It is so kind of your dear mother to lend you to me for a little while. I have had the piano put into my boudoir for you, and you must take a drive every day ; for you mustn’t stay too much in my room to lose your roses again, which I am glad to see come back.’

Lady Emily had not made up her mind to ask Mrs. Erle ‘to lend’ her Laura without much serious consideration. Being of an expansive nature, she longed for companionship other than that of her maid, and in this longing her thoughts turned to Laura rather than to any one else, even though she tried to make them turn in the direction of Miss Bingley ; but then she remembered those fears which had been aroused in her mind at Christmas.

However, as she had seen nothing since to confirm those fears, and as her dear son was abroad, she ventured to give the invitation, especially as she resolved never to mention her son's name to Laura, feeling that it might, perhaps, be as well to abstain from dwelling on his perfections to a susceptible heart. She would also contrive to make her guest's visit to her terminate before his return from the Continent.

The first part of this programme Lady Emily carried out completely—in her own estimation. To her it seemed that she never spoke of her son, never dwelt fondly on his endearing qualities, never anticipated his return. In reality she did little else, for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh; she could no more help talking of him than she could help breathing, and Laura listened with less weariness than of yore. She had recovered her tone of mind, and, being less full of her own sorrow, had more sympathy for the joys and sorrows of others. Besides, she never forgot that crisis in her life

when Harold's few words of kindness had come to her like a light in a dark place.

It appeared that Lady Emily had not informed her son of her illness. She was in the habit, when he was absent, of writing to him three times a week, and continued to do so now, sitting up in bed for the purpose.

‘I would not alarm him for the world, you know, my dear. He would be running home to take care of me, and so lose all his time.’

And as Lady Emily did not make mention of her illness, neither did she of Laura's visit.

The latter found this visit far less dull than the preceding one, though her kindly hostess was ill and she saw few people ; but the country was now as lovely as it had before been depressing and dull ; the lanes were rich with every variety of wild-flower, fern, and grass ; tall foxgloves stood everywhere in stately pride, and the leafy bracken made a covert for the deer and hare, though its shades of dark green were beginning to give place to the glorious russet of the later season.

Laura went for a drive every day, and, being no longer restricted by Lady Emily's fears, could go where she pleased, and made many an expedition alone to the top of the hill. One day when, having left the pony carriage at the foot, she had gone up and was sitting to rest for a few minutes, her attention was attracted by an object which struck her at first as a sort of ambulatory windmill in full work. The main body of the figure seemed to be keeping in motion something that looked like arms, and to be running hither and thither after an apparently unattainable object.

A nearer view showed a tall gaunt man propelling before him a long pole with a capacious green pouch attached thereto; he wore a white coat, the widely flapping tails of which, flying out behind, gave him the appearance of a windmill.

Soon Miss Erle saw that the pole, pouch, and tails pertained to the entity known amongst men as the Reverend Theophilus Saffery, of Snail Farm. The two former were,

in fact, a net for the capture of butterflies ; and the gentleman's brown-holland coat, worn by him for purposes of coolness, being loose and flying out behind, had looked like a pair of wings.

He soon became aware of Miss Erle's presence and came towards her, removing a large straw hat, much the worse for wear, from a head which had become somewhat heated in the chase.

From the crown of this hat Mr. Saffery took a large red handkerchief, with which he first carefully wiped his head till it shone like a beautiful smooth pink billiard-ball, and then proceeded to mop his face vigorously.

‘Miss Erle! Is it possible? Do I find you here—alone? Have the beauties of nature drawn you hither, or does some more learned object procure for this favoured spot the honour of your gracious and beautiful presence?’

A pink billiard-ball, with a rough outline of features portrayed on one side, surmounting a long bent pole, and endowed with the power

of speech, will convey some idea of Mr. Theophilus Saffery.

Next to the irresistible desire to laugh which he always excited in Miss Erle's mobile soul, was the conviction at this moment, 'I'm in for the Tumulus of Hector!'

'How do you do, Mr. Saffery?' were her spoken words, as she put her small hand into the capacious red one held out by her interlocutor.

'It is an altogether unexpected felicity to meet you here,' went on the gentleman. 'I little thought when I came up in search of an insect, which has successfully eluded my pursuit, that I should be compensated by the sight of so rare and delicate an object as yourself, far surpassing in brightness the butterfly which it was my ambition to add to my collection.'

'Thank you, Mr. Saffery; that is really a very pretty compliment, but I hope you don't mean to put me in your net. I should not appreciate the honour, I'm afraid, any more than the insect which has already eluded your

pursuit. Don't you find butterfly-hunting rather fatiguing work this hot weather?"

'I am warm,' answered the entomologist, continuing to mop himself, 'though my clothing is of the lightest kind, compatible with decency;' grasping the covering of his lower limbs as if to exhibit its texture. 'I will, with your permission, seat myself here, where I can recover coolness and enjoy the inestimable privilege of converse with you.'

'But won't the insect be gone in the mean time?' asked Laura, hoping to escape Hector.

A contortion, meant for a smile, passed over Mr. Saffery's face. It was due partly to the difficulty experienced by a man of his years in throwing himself in youthful fashion on the ground at the lady's feet, partly to the desire of expressing without words that the loss of the insect was an absolute nothing when compared to the delight of her society. The truth was, Mr. Saffery was too hot and tired to hunt any more; but with the perfidy natural to his sex, he wished her to believe that he abandoned the chase for her sake. It

appeared that he had not known she was at Melbury ; had he done so, he would certainly have requested his sister to call on her. She would do so to-morrow, however, thus relieving the tedium of what must necessarily be a dull sojourn in a sick house.

By degrees they got to Hector and the Tumulus, as she had foreseen, and she had the other side of the controversy. Mr. Saffery grew quite pathetic on Harold Carew's refusal to meet him in fair fight. How was it possible to grapple with an enemy who persistently eluded him? No arguments can produce any effect until they are, at least, fairly listened to.

Laura, by way of consolation, urged that Mr. Carew's belief or disbelief could not affect the truth of the theory, but that only convinced Mr. Saffery how little she really understood his feelings on the subject. What mattered to him the implicit belief of the whole congregation of the faithful if that one stubborn unbeliever remained unconverted?

The poor butterfly-hunter was as much in earnest on this absurd question as if he had held that the end of the world is close at hand, or had wished to convert the Jews, or to convince mankind that there is no hereafter.

As they went down the hill together, he begged that she would consider the matter, and, when she saw Mr. Carew, use her influence to get him to discuss the question calmly with his neighbour.

With due gravity she promised, and on her return related it all in her vivacious way to Lady Emily, who forthwith became deeply thoughtful.

Since the day on which he had shown her his entomological treasures Mr. Saffery had always been eager in his inquiries for Laura, and if Laura could only be made eager in her interest in Mr. Saffery, what a consummation it would be! Lady Emily would then always have her near her, yet without any fear of her as a possible daughter-in-law. It was, to be sure, scarcely easier to imagine her presiding

at Snail Farm than in a dull schoolroom over dull girls, but Lady Emily would not conjure up difficulties. Mr. Saffery was an excellent man, a clergyman, well off; not good-looking, certainly, that Lady Emily had to admit, and the slight fringe of hair at the back of his naked head had always reminded her of hay—still looks are not everything; and if Mr. Saffery could induce Laura to live within an easy distance of Melbury, it would satisfactorily account for the fact of his existence, which had hitherto been an insoluble problem to Lady Emily and her son.

Miss Saffery called the next day and her brother the following one, and then came an invitation to luncheon at Snail Farm, which her hostess insisted that Laura should accept, in spite of the young lady's protests.

'You mustn't get moped to death, my dear. It is very dull here, and it does you good to go out.'

But before that day another event had taken place. Harold Carew had come home.

One afternoon, on returning from her

customary drive, Laura found the house in a state of commotion consequent on his arrival.

He had met by chance at Berlin a casual acquaintance, who spoke of his mother's severe illness, inquiring how she was. Much alarmed, Harold started at once, and travelled without stopping till he reached Melbury.

Notwithstanding Lady Emily's delight at seeing him, she was seriously disturbed by his inopportune return.

After the first greetings were over he censured her gently for not having summoned him home, and when she, by way of excuse, pleaded that she had not lacked tender nursing, having had Laura Erle with her, an expression of pleasure brightened his face, such as she had never known a lady's name call forth before.

She hardly knew what to do. Should she send for Miss Bingley, or make some excuse for putting an end to Laura's visit, or should she trust to Providence?

It would be difficult to manage about Miss Bingley: she being ill, what would that

young lady do at Melbury? It might possibly happen, too—it probably would—that her recalcitrant son would do as he had often done before when that damsel's charms had been forced on him,—either make himself painfully conspicuous by his absence, or, if present, exhibit himself in his least-pleasing aspect by maintaining a complete silence, always liable to misconstruction; or he might break the silence only to launch gloomy sarcasms from the depths of his arm-chair at people and things in general. To put a sudden end to Laura's visit was not easy without violating both good taste and good feeling, nor did she like to think of the blank the loss of that bright companionship would make in her own life, confined, as she still was, to her room, though able to be up.

Finally, Lady Emily determined to trust to Providence—always a safe course of action, especially when one does not know what other to pursue; and surely Providence, in return for such trust, would not show itself so unmindful of its duty as to permit the

subjugation of the obdurate heart of the sole hope of the Carews by a girl, charming indeed, and lovable, but yet not one of the select few who might lawfully aspire to the honour of such a conquest.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. CAREW'S coming was not less annoying to Laura than to her hostess. Being a young person of exceedingly acute perceptions she had, very soon after her arrival, become aware that Lady Emily always spoke of her son under protest, so to say. Unaware of the fears which had been aroused in the mother's heart, she attributed this to a suspicion on the part of the latter that she herself was aspiring to Mr. Carew's hand. The thought that such a suspicion should attach to her was especially galling to a nature like hers, in which sensitive, even excessive, pride was predominant. She had perceived, too, that Lady Emily was desirous of throwing her into the society of Mr. Saffery, which fact awoke in her some rather scornful amusement. She saw that her friend wished to have her near her, but did not deem her good enough for

her own son ; mindful, however, of the lady's kindness to herself and her family, to John in particular, she restrained the half-contemptuous anger the first perception of these things produced in her.

Harold's return was an extreme annoyance to her. He too, no doubt, attributed to her designs on himself or his property ; and Miss Erle commented mentally with some severity on the vanity and self-consciousness of men who think every woman who sees them wishes to possess herself of themselves or their goods. She resolved to propose to Lady Emily that, now her son was come home, she, Laura, should return to Smedston. If Lady Emily refused to accede to this, she would stay with her till she was well, of course, but would not ever again visit Melbury. Meantime she would see as little of Mr. Carew as possible ; and she began by asking Lady Emily if she might dine with her up-stairs that evening instead of going down, as she had hitherto done, to the dining-room.

‘ You are so much better now,’ she said

in an explanatory voice, 'and it will be pleasanter for you.'

'Certainly, my dear; it is most kind of you to think of it; it is dull up here alone.'

This ready compliance convinced Laura that her suspicions were correct.

Mr. Carew was very tired, nevertheless he dressed and went down to the drawing-room with a pleasurable expectation of finding there a bright blushing face, which would look up at him with a quick laughing glance, or perhaps a sad one, as had latterly been the case. Whichever it might be, it would be interesting to watch for it and to follow the movements of the graceful figure in its white dress. Finding the room empty, he took up the paper till dinner was announced.

'Does Miss Erle know?' he asked.

'Miss Erle is not coming down, sir.'

'Not coming down! Why not?'

'Miss Erle is dining with her ladyship up-stairs, sir.'

'Has she always done so?'

'No, sir; this is the first evening.'

Mr. Carew said 'Oh!' and went slowly into the large lonely dining-room, where Laura had hitherto sat every day in solitary state.

That night, in the housekeeper's room, Mr. Waters informed Miss Scott that Mr. Carew had certainly looked disappointed on hearing that Miss Erle was not coming down to dinner.

'Well, it would be a great match for her, and a change from Smedston Rectory, which isn't much of a place compared to Melbury, though good for a clergyman as isn't supposed to be rich, and she is a nice young lady who isn't single for the want of asking, Mr. Waters—that I know. Mr. Claude Dashwood was anxious enough to have her, and only married the present Mrs. Claude just out of despair.'

To have refused a man is always a feather in a woman's cap. To refuse a rich one is a whole capful of feathers. Mr. Waters was duly impressed, and certainly poured Laura out her glass of water that night with increased respect.

Mr. Carew was not long over his solitary repast, and immediately after it went up to his mother's room, where, sitting by the sofa, was the cause of his disappointment, looking, not pale and depressed as he had last seen her, but brilliant and provocative, as she had remained in his memory after his first introduction to her. The brilliancy of her colouring and the slight defiance of her manner were accounted for by the fact that, for many and sundry reasons, she was overpoweringly shy at meeting him.

He knew all about her love for, and subsequent quarrel with, Claude; had seen her in tears in consequence of that quarrel, and would no doubt now be thinking of her in connection with Ariadne and Dido and Ænone and other love-lorn ladies. He also, of course, was fully persuaded that she was bent on leading him into the thorny paths of matrimony.

These were the various considerations which added brilliancy to her cheeks and eyes, and imparted a hauteur to her usually bright

manner which, fortunately or unfortunately, added to her attractions at the moment.

‘It’s all too hateful!’ was the anathema launched by her, in her vexation, against the world in general, as she shook hands with the gentleman.

‘I was so disappointed not to find you down-stairs, Miss Erle,’ he said. ‘I had been looking forward to the pleasure of seeing you at dinner; but I suppose I ought not to wish to deprive my mother of your society. You have been most kind in devoting yourself to her.’

‘I hope you think she does credit to my nursing,’ responded Laura, feeling she must make a remark.

‘Most certainly I do. The only thing that induces me to forgive her for not having sent for me is the fact that she secured such an efficient nurse as yourself;’ taking his mother’s hand, and looking at her with affection. ‘But you should consider, mother, the effect your conduct must have on my reputation. People will of course think what a heartless

fellow your only son must be never to have come near you in your illness. Miss Erle now has, I daresay, formed the worst possible opinion of my heart.'

Lady Emily always looked supremely happy when her son addressed her in this tone of grave badinage. She would blush and smile, like a girl receiving a similar homage from a lover. She fondly stroked the hand he had laid on her beautiful white one as she answered, with a tender smile,

'Indeed, no, dear Harold. She thinks you as kind and good as you really are; she has told me so many times. Haven't you, dear Laura?'

Dear Laura felt excessively annoyed.

'Means to catch me with honey,' would no doubt be the *célibataire's* comment; but as he was looking at her, expecting some reply, she said, in a tone considerably dashed with coldness,

'Even if I thought otherwise, it would hardly be polite to say so; would it?' Then rising: 'I am sure you must have a great

deal to talk to Mr. Carew about, Lady Emily, so I will say good-night!

‘Oh, don’t go, Miss Erle!’ exclaimed Harold. ‘Why, I have hardly seen you; have not had time to thank you for all the care you have taken of my mother.’

But she persisted in her determination; and, after a few more words of ‘good-night,’ departed; feeling somehow angry and uncomfortable, and leaving Lady Emily not quite at ease.

The latter noticed the change in her young guest’s manner; saw that she was less genial and unconstrained; and felt an uneasy consciousness that the change was caused by Laura’s perception of her own fears on her son’s behalf.

This was grievous to Lady Emily. She had not wished to wound Laura at all; but maternal love was stronger than aught else. To secure her son’s good she must sacrifice her own feelings, even her strong distaste to giving the least particle of pain to any living thing.

If only she could accomplish the Saffery marriage! Mr. Saffery would make handsome settlements; and she had discovered another advantage which would result from the alliance. Miss Saffery, too, had money; and as nothing was more unlikely than that she should ever enter the holy estate, she would bequeath her all to her nephews and nieces. Nature would thus vindicate herself for having created Miss Saffery, by providing a function for her in the world. Hitherto that function had not been very plain to Lady Emily.

Since her arrival at Melbury for this second visit, Laura had breakfasted in a small room opening off the boudoir. This little room looked east, and the morning sun came in very pleasantly through the windows, which commanded the lake and the hills and the deer-park. She thought with satisfaction that, as she had always hitherto breakfasted here, she could continue to do so still in solitude. What, then, was her annoyance when, on going into this room the morning after

Mr. Carew's arrival, she saw places laid for two!

Almost before she had time to realise her vexation, and while she was standing by the window, the morning sun irradiating her brown hair, Harold came in.

She had not heard his step over the thickly carpeted floor, and started and coloured vividly on seeing him. With him came a straight-haired brown retriever, who rushed up to her as to an old acquaintance.

Harold looked quite radiant this morning; he was rested after his long hurried journey, relieved about his mother, pleased to see Laura. He was dressed in shooting costume, and his black hair was as smooth and glossy as a raven's wing.

'How do you do, Miss Erle? I hope I have not kept you waiting breakfast. They told me you were usually ready about this time.'

'I have only just come in, and have not even been to see Lady Emily yet.'

'She had a good night. I have this mo-

ment come from her. Do you object to my dog? He is so delighted to see me that, when I ordered him to lie down outside, he did all but actually ask in words to be allowed to come in.'

'Doesn't he all but speak? I know that look in his eyes so well. He and I have become such friends.'

'Then that accounts for his disobedience,' he said, smiling. 'Ladies always spoil a dog. I wondered how he had got into such bad order.'

Under cover of this little colloquy they sat down to breakfast.

A gentleman who has not yet attained the age of thirty-five years, and who has always regarded the sex as an enigma, the solution of which offers some interesting problems to the masculine mind, may be supposed to experience sundry pleasurable emotions in the anticipation of entertaining in his own house an agreeable young lady, whose character and fortunes have already engaged his attention. And he experiences these emo-

tions even if his friends have attributed to him strong celibate tendencies; for friends not unfrequently attribute to us tendencies of which we are ourselves ignorant.

Mr. Carew had little idea that he had been labelled as thus inimical to matrimony; not that matrimony entered his head in connection with Miss Erle. He had no thoughts on the matter, except that he would find breakfast more agreeable, with her opposite for a study, than alone in the dining-room.

‘What time does she breakfast, mother?’ he had asked his parent, when taking leave of her on the preceding night.

Lady Emily noted the pronoun with maternal solicitude; the noun - substantive to which it referred had evidently been occupying the speaker’s mind, but she prudently betrayed no alarm.

‘She has always breakfasted up-stairs dearest, about half-past nine, I think: that is early for you, isn’t it? Perhaps you had better be independent of her.’

‘Early? no, mother. I shall be quite ready by that time. I shall have a good deal to see to to-morrow, you know.’

‘Still, I think you had better be independent, dear. She has breakfast in my morning-room. It was so gloomy for her alone down-stairs; but that would be awkward for you.’

‘Not at all, mother. I’m very fond of that little room; it always reminds me of you. I used to learn my letters there when I was a small chap. Don’t you remember?’

This touching allusion was made in all innocence, but it quite vanquished his mother; she made no further objection, and gave Waters to understand that Mr. Carew would breakfast in the morning-room with Miss Erle.

No anticipation is ever fully realised. Harold thought it would be pleasant to entertain his mother’s guest, and it was pleasant. His eye rested with satisfaction on her graceful movements as she presided amongst the tea-

cups, addressing a word from time to time to the dog, who was resting his head on her lap, and gently wagging his tail; but he missed something.

A quiet brook flowing equably along, soothing the ear with soft murmurs, is, no doubt, a charming thing; but a mountain-stream that laughs and dances over its course, indulging in unexpected leaps and curves, now hiding and then peeping out again in sparkling beauty, has for some people irresistible attractions.

Melbury had many quiet brooks, while it did not abound in mountain-streams, which is perhaps the reason why Mr. Carew was interested in the more novel form of loveliness.

But Miss Erle this morning was the still soothing brook. Nothing could be more demure, proper, and *posée* than her manner. It was difficult to think of her as ever making a flippant observation, or originating a remark on any subject; and Mr. Carew felt vaguely disappointed. He wondered if anything would

make her look up suddenly at him, with one of her quick rejoinders; he even hazarded one or two questions about 'Farleigh Priory, or Abbey, as you prefer to call it,' which she might well have accepted as a challenge, but to which she replied with irreproachable propriety of speech and look; and he, though disappointed, did not feel justified in repeating the attack. Altogether it was very provoking; but what consistency was to be expected from a woman, especially from such a woman? An almost irresistible desire to quarrel with her, so as to force her into free speech, seized him there and then, but her dignified manner repressed him.

He felt that he might as well have breakfasted with the Juno-like Miss Bingley. But he learned something; and that, to a diligent searcher after truth, should have compensated for much. He saw that her reticence and repose were not assumed, but natural and unforced; they were partly, no doubt, due to the recent troubles she had undergone, but they were also due to the fact—a humiliat-

ing one for him—that he had no power to call forth those charms of manner which had so fascinated him.

Had she buried those charms in the grave of her love for Claude Dashwood?

CHAPTER X.

WHEN Laura went, as had been agreed upon, to lunch with Mr. and Miss Saffery, Lady Emily charged her to ask them to come to afternoon tea some day soon.

The girl noticed, with mingled resentment and amusement, the tone of patronage in which her friend always spoke of these two people, whose alliance was deemed good enough for her. They were respectively, 'that good Miss Saffery,' 'that worthy Mr. Saffery.'

As she was driving along in the pony carriage Harold suddenly appeared on the high bank, and jumped down into the road. She could not but slacken her speed, as he showed an evident intention of speaking to her.

'Where are you going, Miss Erle?'

'To lunch at Snail Farm;' with the first

gleam of fun he had seen in her eyes since his return.

‘At Snail Farm! Does that amuse you?’

‘Not at all; but Miss Saffery asked me, and your mother wished me to go.’

‘Why should she wish it? You will be bored to death. I can’t think why my dear mother keeps up with such fossils; they are neither amusing nor instructive.’

‘She esteems Mr. Saffery highly, and is always impressing his worthiness on me.’

‘She has an army of these fossils, to whom she thinks it needful to be civil, but I don’t see why she should inflict them on you.’

‘He is going to show me his drawings of the Tumulus of Hector.’

‘I shall speak to my mother about it. It is too bad.’

‘Pray, don’t! I am much interested in Hector; I like him so much better than Achilles.’

‘Surely you must know—’ he began eagerly.

She interrupted him.

‘That they never lived at all, you are going to say, but don’t; I shall believe in them to my dying day. You want to rob the world of all its poetry, till you make it as dull as—as—I can’t think of a simile dull enough for what you are bringing us to.’

‘Do you call the Achilles you believe in poetic? I call him a coarse vindictive barbarian;’ and off went Mr. Carew on his pet hobby. Once mounted, there was no stopping him; and Laura was so late in reaching Snail Farm that Miss Saffery was in despair about the elaborate luncheon she had prepared in her honour. The latter lady was a smaller edition of her brother.

Fortunately for the beholders, her sex permitted her to conceal the painfully nude appearance of her head by a species of black skull-cap, surmounted by a frilled coiffure, *à la* Dolly Varden. Her scanty remnant of hair was drawn down on each side of her attenuated face in rings, and this, combined with the coquettish look imparted by her head-dress, made conversation with her a severe tax on

her interlocutor's gravity. She spoke in short jerky sentences, with a strong provincial accent. Her speciality was a fixed belief, and an intense desire to propagate the belief, that in the English people are to be found the Lost Tribes of Israel.

This belief was the life and soul of Miss Saffery's existence; it consoled her in all difficulties; strengthened her in all temptations; was, in short, to her all, and more than all, that Hector was to her brother.

In any History of Human Error that may ever be written, the comfort which many excellent people have derived from a firm belief in harmless delusions should not be lost sight of. Ladies had not taken to lecturing in those days, or Miss Saffery would certainly have lectured on the Lost Tribes Found. She was eager to make a convert of Laura; and every moment which could be rescued from Hector and the dried specimens was devoted to enlightening her on this important point, till the visitor's brain was a confused jumble of

the unpronounceable names of deceased butterflies, arguments against Mr. Carew's views on the Mounds, and the Ten Tribes.

Her host and hostess stood one on each side of her, and as soon as one ended the other began.

'But suppose we are the Ten Tribes,' she said at last, thinking a definite idea might lessen the confusion in her brain, 'what difference can it make to us?'

Miss Saffery looked gravely surprised.

'What difference? We come in obviously for all the blessings promised to the Israelites. No matter what happens, we are safe. It is therefore a matter of the most serious import to us as a nation. I believe in it firmly myself, and have found it a blessed and soothing balm, precious to the soul in seasons of personal or national distress. "Dan is a lion's whelp; he shall leap from Bashan." That has evident reference, you see, to the standard of England and the Royal Arms. The allusion to lions is constant, in fact. "And of Gad he saith: he dwelleth as a lion."' "

‘But, then, “Judah is a lion’s whelp,” we are told; and, as I understand, Judah is not one of the Lost Tribes.’

‘That is just it; he is not; but there are a vast number of acknowledged Jews in England—a vast number; and if we are proved to be the Lost Tribes, it is obvious that we enjoy peculiar advantages as inheritors of *all* the blessings promised, both by Moses and Jacob, to the chosen people, not to speak of the many others scattered up and down the Bible.’

‘So that we monopolise everything? That seems rather hard on other nations; but as there are some Jews amongst them too, we may hope they carry some stray blessings with them.’

‘And curses, you know!’

‘Ah, yes; we prove our right to the blessings by leaving the curses for other people. And which tribe do you belong to, Miss Safery?’ looking convinced.

‘Well, that is a grave question. Of course there has been much intermarriage; it will be

difficult to distinguish the tribes and families; but in the time of Ezra there were difficulties too; and the Government might appoint a Royal Commission to inquire into the matter.'

'Well, I hope the commissioners may prove that I belong to the tribe of Gad,' said the incorrigible Laura.

'Gad! and wherefore?' asked Mr. Saffery.

'Because he overcomes at the last, and I like to be on the winning side.'

Laura went home laden with literature about the Ten Tribes, and with a pamphlet on the Tumulus of Hector by the Reverend Theophilus Saffery.

She was so amused that she went up at once to Lady Emily, and began relating her day's adventures before she perceived that Mr. Carew was in the room. She could not draw back, and had to continue her story in his presence.

'There now, dear Harold, you see she did enjoy it!' said Lady Emily. 'He has been scolding me for sending you, my dear.'

‘I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. Look there!’ and she held up before him Mr. Saffery’s pamphlet.

Lady Emily thought it all very satisfactory. Her son was less pleased. He saw nothing amusing in the Saffery oddities, nor could he understand the state of mind which derived pleasure from their contemplation. They only aroused in him anger and irritation; and when, a few days later, the brother and sister came to spend the afternoon, and he heard Laura laughing and talking with them—she was, in fact, drawing both out, very much to her own delectation—he certainly felt deeply moved against her, and thought less highly of her than before.

Even if she did not actually believe in their absurdities, was it courteous or truthful to pretend to do so for her own amusement? Also—and it was an important ‘also,’ though he was totally unconscious that it influenced him—why would she laugh and talk with them, and not with him?

They had tea in the large hall, out of

which opened the dining-room, drawing-room, library, and an apartment especially consecrated to Mr. Carew's use, into and out of which he passed twice while Laura was dispensing tea to the guests.

The second time she asked him if he would not have some. He declined curtly; and she could not wonder at the unfavourable opinion that prevailed about him everywhere outside of his own home.

Nothing could well be more offensive and disagreeable than his manner to Mr. Saffery and his sister. He hardly spoke to them, yet he kept on passing and repassing through the hall, and hovering about the garden, while they were there, as if afraid to let Laura out of his sight.

He was gloomy and depressed all the evening, launching barbed arrows at the sex in general, and at one member of it in particular, while he sat with his mother after dinner, as was his custom.

Miss Erle, in accordance with the rule she had laid down, said good-night immediately

on his arrival, and disappeared. Against this he invariably protested strongly.

‘You run away from me as if I were a wild-beast,’ he said to her one evening in an injured tone. ‘Am I so disagreeable that you can’t endure half an hour of my company?’

She excused herself on the score of letters to write, or fatigue, and persisted in going; and as night after night passed, he grew more and more aggrieved, nor can it be said that he was a very cheerful companion to poor Lady Emily, though he duly sat with her.

His interest in Laura was chiefly manifested at this period by various little lectures administered to her on certain enormities which he seemed to find reprehensible: her exaggerated mode of expression, for example, or her obstinate belief in people or events affirmed by him to be mythical. As he never saw her to converse with except at breakfast, that meal was gradually becoming prolonged to a length which awoke no little comment among the servants.

The day the Safferys were to come, he

said to her, after a more than usually long discussion: 'Well, good-bye, Miss Erle; I suppose I shall hardly see anything more of you to-day, as you don't think me worthy of your society in the evening. I should like to know why you always run away the moment I come?'

He looked at her, waiting for an answer as he stood by her, for he had risen and gone round to her side of the table.

'For various reasons,' she replied; 'the chief being that one visitor at a time is enough for your mother.'

'Yet you sat with her yesterday when Miss Bingley was there.'

She laughed a little, looking convicted.

'How did you know that?'

'I know a good deal, Miss Erle, and I think, moreover, that it is very unkind of you to run away from me as you do. It could not hurt mother if you stayed for a quarter of an hour. I shall have to give up coming to her at night if you persist in going.'

'That would never do, Mr. Carew.'

‘Then you must stay. I begin to discover that you are very obstinate, and that, you are aware, is a sad defect in a lady.’

‘That may be your opinion; it is not mine.’

‘Then I must make it yours by overcoming your obstinacy in this instance.’

‘Which you would think a great triumph?’

‘Well, yes.’

‘Only obstinacy has nothing to do with the matter.’

‘So you may think; but I have my own opinion on the subject. Seriously, I shall begin to be quite affronted if you avoid me in this way. You once told me I should have run the other way had I seen you, which I certainly should not have done; but you are adopting that line yourself with a vengeance now.’

‘I am following your good example.’

‘You are not, for I don’t run away from you, nor must you from me.’

And that night, out of deference to his wish, and to avoid making any undue fuss,

she did stay much longer than usual ; but he, with the Saffery visit fresh in his mind, was sarcastic and gloomy, hardly speaking to her, and she went away at last, not impressed by his courtesy.

The moment she was gone he was angry with himself for having, as he thought, driven her away, and, like a man, vented his anger on his nearest of kin—not yet having an Eve of his own whom he could utilise as a *souffredouleur*. He asked his mother why Laura went away, saying he should not come up-stairs if his presence was made a signal of banishment for her.

Lady Emily repudiated any such idea ; she had never said one word on the subject to the young lady, who had always gone of her own accord.

This did not mend matters, and he continued gloomy and silent ; while his mother, keenly sensitive to the least sign of annoyance on his part, was deeply hurt, more especially when he referred to his other grievance, the visit of the Safferys that afternoon.

Altogether it was the most uncomfortable hour the mother and son had ever spent with each other; and when he left her, which he did much earlier than usual, he said good-night so coldly, and with such a display of temper, that she was quite upset, and Scott, on her arrival, found her lady in tears and more feverish than she had been for weeks.

Much concerned, she went in search of Laura.

‘What can it be, Scott? When I left her she seemed quite well.’

The elegantly attired Miss Scott could not account for it, ‘unless, indeed, Mr. Carew had been put out and had said something to her ladyship; gentlemen are so thoughtless in illness, Miss Erle, and don’t remember how a word upsets a lady; and her ladyship is so set on Mr. Carew that the least look from him, if he was angry, would be enough to make her ill again.’

Miss Erle was quite sure Mr. Carew would not say a word to vex her ladyship, and went to her room at once.

She soon found, however, that Mr. Carew had 'said something.' Lady Emily confessed that 'dear Harold had been a little—only just a little—put out about Mr. Saffery's visit, that was all.'

'And didn't he say good-night to you?' asked Miss Erle somewhat indignantly.

'My dear, yes;' and Laura was on no account to think that he had been angry or at all in fault; he was perfect, as he always was, and it was only his mother who was to blame. 'And I am very sorry to seem silly, my dear, especially before you, who are so sensible. Good Scott should not have called you.'

Laura soothed her without condemning her idol, and then, on leaving her, went down to the library, with a very distinct feeling of indignation against the idol stirring in her veins.

'It is horrid of him to vex his mother; so devoted as she is to him too.'

The evenings were growing chilly, and a wood fire was burning in the library, where Mr. Carew was lying asleep on the sofa.

The fire was getting very dim; but as

Laura opened the door, a heavy log fell, sending up a shower of sparks. The combined sounds awoke Harold. On seeing the figure in white, he started up, throwing back his head and putting up his hand to smooth his glossy black hair, the usual irreproachable neatness of which was rather ruffled by his slumbers.

He was really much alarmed, being only half awake, and not knowing what this visit might portend; but before he had time to speak, Laura, standing half-way between the door and the sofa, said:

‘I beg your pardon for disturbing you, Mr. Carew, but Lady Emily does not seem quite comfortable.’

‘Is she worse? What is the matter?’

He was quite awake now.

‘She is not ill exactly, but—well—she is a little upset; and I think if you would go and say a few words to her, and bid her good-night again, she would sleep better.’

‘I will, certainly. I will go up at once. Thank you for coming to me.’

‘One moment, Mr. Carew. Do not tell her that I, or any one, asked you to go; do it as if of your own accord. She would not, I am sure, be pleased if she thought I had said anything to you.’

‘I will do exactly as you wish; but will she not be surprised to see me again to-night? I mean, sha’n’t I have to explain?’

‘You left her much earlier than usual, did you not? Couldn’t you make that an excuse? I should have thought your own feeling would have suggested something to say to her,’ in a sufficiently significant tone.

‘I quite understand. I will go up at once, and will not say I do so at your suggestion.’

‘Thank you,’ responded Miss Erle, not at all because she felt grateful to him, but because those two words can be made expressive of so much disapproval.

Harold looked as snubbed as he always did on finding himself the victim of a feminine attack.

‘I should have sent you a message,’ went on Laura, ‘instead of coming to you myself,

only then Lady Emily might have learned that your visit was not spontaneous, which would do away with its value. Good-night ;' and with a slight inclination she was leaving the room.

'Won't you take the newspaper?' cried Harold, going after her with it.

When a gentleman is extremely nervous, and wishes at the same time to be polite to a lady, it may be observed that he always offers her the paper, just as he would offer a cigar to one of his own sex.

Miss Erle declined the paper and went upstairs, made very dignified by the glow of anger she still felt against her host.

He followed, feeling less dignified, and went at once to his mother's room.

Some little time after there came a knock at the door of the boudoir, where Laura was sitting absorbed in a book.

'Come in,' she answered, without looking up, thinking it was Scott.

The door opened, and not Scott, but Harold, appeared.

She was half sitting, half lying on the sofa,

somewhat in Turkish fashion, her elbow, with the open sleeve falling back from it, resting on the arm, her hand supporting her pretty head as she read.

He had time to take in these little details, and to think what a charming picture she made, before she became aware of his presence; for she had said 'Come in' almost unconsciously, her mind being wholly given to her reading.

'Miss Erle!'—at his voice she started, colouring brightly as she looked up—'I must apologise for disturbing you, but I came to say that I have seen my mother and made it all right with her. She is quite comfortable, and will, I hope, sleep well.'

'Oh, that is right. You did not say I had spoken to you?'

'No; she believes I went quite of my own accord. She was much pleased; but I—I felt very guilty. She gave me credit for a kind and generous thought, which was yours altogether.'

'That was surely a very allowable and in-

nocent little piece of insincerity under the circumstances,' she said, smiling and looking up at him. 'She would not have slept comfortably had you not gone to her; but the grace of the whole thing would have been destroyed had she not thought the visit spontaneous. It would have been so, I feel sure, had you known how—how distressed she was.'

'You are more generous and amiable than any one I ever met,' he said, a sudden softness in his voice.

'Am I?' laughing. 'Then you have changed your opinion of me. At one time you described me as a termagant, whom wise people would do well to avoid.'

'I? I never did;' eagerly. 'Who can have told you so?'

'I heard it on good authority, I assure you.'

'It must be a mistake. It is impossible I can have said so—at least—' hesitating.

'At least you have just a faint recollection of having formed some such opinion of me, and perhaps expressed it. I am

glad you have modified it, at all events;' laughing.

He came more forward into the room, and stood resting his arms on the back of a tall prie-dieu chair near the sofa.

'I am not sure that I have modified it;' looking at her deliberately. 'A termagant is usually supposed to be a lady gifted with the power of expressing in sufficiently distinct language strong disapproval of any one who may have displeased her, especially if the offender happens to belong to my sex. Is not that so?'

'It may be; but in speaking to any one who happens to belong to your sex, I never admit anything, Mr. Carew.'

'You are wise; for the admission would, in this instance, convict yourself.'

'May I ask how?'

'If making an offender feel strongly the force of your disapprobation constitutes a termagant, you have certainly vindicated your title to the name. You made me feel yours very distinctly.'

‘I did not express one word of disapprobation, Mr. Carew.’

‘Ladies have various ways of expressing their feelings. Your looks and tones are very eloquent, and they made me keenly sensible of my demerits, I assure you.’

She looked down gravely for a minute, then up at him.

‘Well, Mr. Carew, I did not know I had expressed it; but I did feel angry when I went down to the library. I could not think how you could say or do anything to grieve one so gentle and so devoted to you as Lady Emily is.’

‘I plead altogether guilty, Miss Erle. The truth is, my equanimity is never proof against that fool Saffery; but as I have made my peace with my mother, who has quite forgiven me, will you be lenient too, and do the same?’

‘If I did not, I should really deserve the epithet you have bestowed on me.’

‘As to the epithet—well, I like a termagant;’ coming over to the sofa and holding

out his hand. 'Good-night, Miss Erle; my mother will, I think, give a good report of me in the morning.'

'Good-night, Mr. Carew; I have no doubt whatever that she will.'

He went away, and she sat for a few minutes with an amused smile on her face, and then resumed her book.

CHAPTER XI.

LADY EMILY did give a good report of her son. The moment Laura went to her room on the following day she burst into a glowing account of his more than angelic goodness, relating with tears of proud affection how he had come up and been 'so dear and affectionate, and apologised for any little word he may have said.'

In short, Lady Emily had no words to express her sense of his almost superhuman excellence, or her own want of self-control in having let Laura perceive that anything had occurred between them. Laura must not form an unfavourable opinion of him in consequence, or think that he was exacting or ill-tempered, 'like Claude Dashwood,' Lady Emily was on the point of adding, but fortunately stopped in time.

Miss Erle was, however, quite aware that

her former lover was in her hostess's mind. Whenever the latter wished to convey an idea of an especially disagreeable man, she invariably described Claude's most salient characteristics, and then flattered herself that she had not alluded to him, because she had not actually mentioned him by name.

She disliked him as strongly as it was in her nature to dislike any one, and she was by no means deficient in some good positive qualities, a capacity for strong dislike amongst others.

After this, the mother, fearing her guest might fail duly to appreciate her son, could not refrain, in spite of her wise resolution not to foster any possible interest about him in Laura's mind, from occasionally relating some 'touching little trait' of his, or even repeating at times any opinion he may by chance have expressed respecting the young lady.

These stories and remarks would come out incidentally, and at first Laura was only amused; but by degrees she began to feel a delightful satisfaction in hearing that 'dear

Harold said to-day how much he admired a figure like yours;' or 'my son thinks you are so very amiable, dear Laura, and so kind-hearted;' or 'How extremely pretty your hands are, my dear! Harold was saying yesterday he had never seen any so beautifully shaped.'

Laura did not attach too much importance to these remarks, of course; still it is pleasant to think we are appreciated, and we do naturally somehow learn to appreciate those who show such discrimination where we are concerned.

The night following that of Harold's first visit to Laura there came again a knock at her door as she was, after her custom, half sitting, half kneeling on the sofa, buried in a book.

'Come in,' she answered, and this time did not start when Harold's dark face appeared at the opening.

'I have come to report myself to you, Miss Erle,' he said, advancing into the room. 'I have just said good-night to my mother, and have left her very comfortable.'

Laura gravely replied that she was glad of that, not without some wonder that he should consider it necessary to make the announcement.

‘I did not know whether you might not think I should be guilty of some delinquency to-night again,’ he said, with a laugh indicative of a certain sense of need of apology for his visit; ‘so I came to give a good account of myself.’

She smiled of course, and could not but look up at him out of her dark eyes and say something, she hardly knew what, neither did he—words go such a little way in these matters.

He came over and leaned with his arms folded across the back of the heavy arm-chair, whence he could watch her and talk to her, and she could talk to him and watch him too, if she pleased, from her sultana-like position on the sofa.

He had not quite shut the door, as if he meant to go again directly; but he stayed talking for some time.

‘Mother had no idea that you told me to go to her last night,’ he began; ‘I feel I didn’t half thank you for doing so.’

He had made precisely the same remark at breakfast that morning, which shows that the inventive faculty was not strong in him; but it did duty again very well, one remark being really quite as good as another under the circumstances.

‘I suppose I must not disturb you any longer,’ he said at last, reluctantly moving as if to go.

She did not utter a word to detain him, but several weighty observations occurred to him just then which he felt bound to make before he finally took his leave.

The following night he came again ‘to report himself,’ and the following to bring Miss Erle her pocket-handkerchief, which she had dropped, he said, in his mother’s room. The handkerchief was not hers at all, but Lady Emily’s, and had Mr. Carew been as rigidly strict with himself as he would have been with another—with an opponent, for example,

on the Great Encampment question—he would have confessed that he shrewdly suspected the fact when he picked it up, determined to believe that it was the young lady's property.

Every night he 'just came for a minute,' leaving the door open, thus admitting a horrible draught, and meaning to go again directly, and every evening he stayed a little longer and looked a little happier and more amused, and Laura looked happier and more amused too. It was natural to her to like to talk to a young man, though she had once made adamantine resolutions that to this especial young man she would never talk more than was barely necessary for purposes of politeness, always bearing in mind why he was surnamed 'Harefoot' by his friends. But when a young lady breakfasts every morning in the pleasant sunshine with a gentleman who comes in looking delighted to see her, shaking hands with her as though the world contained no other young lady, bringing in his beautiful dog, and saying he does so entirely out of deference to her wishes (though in her heart

she knows he does it out of deference to his own, as he does all else in fact, talking to her included); and when the gentleman, if by chance he meet her during the day, manifests unmistakable pleasure, making all sorts of ingenious yet transparent devices to multiply those chances, and in the evening resolutely adopting the policy of Mahomet towards the mountain, and standing for more than an hour for her fair sake,—when he does all this, the young lady must be adamantine indeed who does not thaw a little.

Miss Erle was not adamantine towards any one; towards her natural enemy she was the very reverse, having a heart of wax for his sufferings, supposed or real.

And as she observed Harold for herself, instead of accepting other people's observations about him, she began to doubt if there were any foundation at all for the opinions and stories current respecting him.

He certainly showed no desire to avoid her, and so far from deeming her soulless or mindless, it seemed to her that he thought

more of her mind than of her face. He did not invariably contrive to bring the conversation round to her eyes, or her colour, or her shoulders, as Claude used to do, in a way that had always jarred on her inexpressibly, though she was by no means unmindful of the claims and value of those necessary portions of her personality; but no young lady with intelligence above that of a kitten likes to have it assumed that she consists altogether of eyes and shoulders and colour. She feels that there are other things in her too, claiming attention imperiously; and during the many excursions made by Harold and Laura into the territory of each other's minds, the latter could never discover that he ignored those claims, nor was she ever conscious, as she had been with Claude, of being repressed; made to feel, against her own better instincts, that her intelligence and vague yearnings after something were a crime, evidences of a higher nature of which she would do well to be ashamed, and to conceal all trace; so feeling thus free and unconstrained, she grew to like

talking to Harold above all things. If he would only have sat down instead of standing with his arms folded, leaning on the back of the arm-chair! As she did not ask him to sit down, it was partly her fault, but she had some reserve of memory for his supposed belief in 'designs;'—besides, his standing gave his visits an accidental character which his sitting down would have destroyed.

When one is standing one can always feel that one is 'just going,' and that is convenient should some flavour of doubt disturb one's conscience respecting the entire lawfulness of the action in which one is engaged.

Mr. Carew was, of course, his own master; he had a vote—several votes—while the mother, without whose agency even the worshippers of Force could not possibly have brought him into being, had not one; he was a distinguished scholar, at least in his own estimation; he had ample means, and Melbury would one day surely be his: if any one, therefore, could be said to be a worthy lord of himself and of his own actions, it was he.

And yet Mr. Carew was no more free to act precisely as he pleased than any other free man who enjoys the blessings of constitutional government.

Lady Emily was the gentlest of living creatures, the most tender, the least exacting; yet her distinguished son, with all his advantages, always felt compelled, when he thought of her in connection with those evening visits to Laura, to pay to conscience, or to her, that tribute of 'just going.' He could hardly tell how the consciousness of her disapproval had arisen; it had gradually been growing on him; and he was now fully persuaded that Laura's refusal to sit in his mother's room in the evening after his arrival was owing to some word or unexpressed wish of the latter. So, though he went to the boudoir every night, he never told Lady Emily that he did so.

She knew it, nevertheless; for Laura very innocently and openly took back that handkerchief which he had perfidiously made the pretext for a visit to her, giving it to Scott

before her lady, and saying how it had come into her possession.

She attached less importance to the visits than did Harold. They were pleasant to her, but nothing more; they had none of the exquisite charm for her that they had for him; and even had they been equally delightful, she would never have thought of concealing them. She spoke of them openly, repeating very often the conversations they had had; and Lady Emily listened, and very soon proposed to her son that he should return to the Continent to pursue his studies, she being now quite well enough to be left with dear Laura, who took such care of her. Mr. Carew declined returning to the Continent. He would not think of leaving his mother.

The events and details connected with the beginning of an acquaintance which has influenced our lives make a deeper impression than any occurring later on, and they seem to spread themselves out over a larger portion of time than they really occupied.

Those visits which had for Harold such a

delicious charm extended, in fact, little over a week; but the week was an important one to him, and a long one, for it was full of incidents, each one of which was an event to him.

‘I heard you singing beautifully to-day, Miss Erle,’ he said to her one evening; ‘I did not know you had such a voice. I suppose you are very fond of music?’

‘Very.’

‘I wish you would play and sing to me sometimes. It is an odd thing, but I can always work better when music is going on.’

‘Can you?’ looking up, interested. ‘Hasn’t it a wonderful effect? It sets one’s brain on fire, it gives one ideas; I have heard very little, but I should think really grand music must be almost more than one could bear. Have you ever heard any?’

‘Very often; in Germany and in London too.’

‘And how does it make you feel? Does it set your brain on fire, as it would mine?’

‘I can hardly tell you. Grand music

affects me in a way I cannot describe to you—it is inspiring. I cannot picture to myself a future world of happiness where one would never hear those splendid choruses—from the *Messiah*, for example, or *Moses in Egypt*.'

'I have never heard either,' she said regretfully.

'Haven't you? How I should like to take you to hear the *Messiah*!'

'But do you criticise?' she asked anxiously. 'I dread going to hear music with musical people; they disturb my enjoyment, especially in church.'

'How so?'

'They pull the effect to pieces; they whisper to me that the first treble is singing flat, or that the tenor is hoarse. I like to sit in a corner and hear it without thinking that it is composed of trebles and tenors at all. It is a sort of message to me, coming from I don't know where, and not produced by human agency. I never look at the singers; and I hate to have the music resolved into trebles and altos and tenors, who, if you chance to

see them, are soulless-looking boys or men, who come running and bustling out, glad that their work is over.'

'But, without attention to details, you could not have the perfection which so delights you.'

'I know that; but then I don't want to know how the effect is produced; I only want to enjoy it.'

'I am making new discoveries about you every day,' he said; 'I had no idea you were such an enthusiastic lover of music. Why do you so seldom sing? You have a beautiful voice.'

'It is such an uncertain one that it is of no use to me. If I could have depended on it, I might have made my fortune,' she answered, laughing.

'I wish you would sing to me sometimes.'

'I will, with pleasure, when I can, but my voice is never the same for two days together.'

The following afternoon, while Laura was sitting with Lady Emily, Mr. Carew came in,

evidently highly excited, with the newspaper in his hand.

‘Miss Erle, they are going to have a grand musical function at ——, with all the best singers, and I should like to take you. They are to have the *Messiah*.’

‘Oh, what I have always longed to hear!’

In her surprise she sprang up, her hands clasped, her face flushed with the first rapture of delighted expectation. Indulgence in her passion for music had always been a luxury beyond her means; but to hear the *Messiah* had been the dream of her life, and the prospect of realising it quite took her out of herself.

Harold had never seen such a transformation in a human face before, and was as much astonished as he was delighted, more especially as he was the person who had called forth that wonderful look of beauty. But Lady Emily interposed to damp the enthusiasm of both.

‘My dear Harold! how can you take

Laura to ——? You could not possibly get back the same day. It is too far.'

'We could come back the next day, if you did not mind being left, mother, just for one night.'

'My dear boy! what are you thinking of? Such a proceeding is quite out of the question! Laura, I could not allow it.'

'Oh, no, of course not,' said the girl, feeling much ashamed of her impulsive demonstration.

'But we must manage it somehow,' exclaimed Harold eagerly. 'I'm sure there must be a train.'

But there was no train, though he spent the day in trying to prove that there was, calling in the help of the discreet Mr. Waters and of his own servant, who 'always could manage trains,' as his master affirmed. In this instance, however, he failed. By no possibility could they go from Melbury to —— and back in one day; and Lady Emily, in private, severely took her son to task for his lamentable want of knowledge of the pro-

prieties. How could he suppose she would allow him to take a young lady on such an expedition—alone?

‘No, I suppose it would not have done; though, upon my soul, I don’t see why.’

He was bitterly disappointed—far more so than Laura, who after the very first moment saw the impossibility of the whole thing.

Lady Emily consoled both by saying she would take Laura to hear the *Messiah* on some other occasion—the first that should present itself.

That did not compensate him as much as perhaps it ought.

‘I should like to have taken you myself,’ he said, sitting down beside her. ‘I should not have disturbed you by criticising any one or any thing.’

‘You are so kind and thoughtful, Mr. Carew; and really I feel as much indebted to you as if we had gone.’

‘I’m afraid you are greatly disappointed.’

‘Not so much as my childish behaviour might make you suppose;’ colouring at the

recollection of her ecstatic reception of his proposal. 'It is of no use being disappointed about an impossibility.'

'Well, you must promise to come with me some day to hear it; I shall consider that an engagement. We must manage it somehow, eh, mother?'

Lady Emily agreed that they must; she also about this time had it strongly borne in on her that a passive attitude of trust in Providence was no longer prudent. It is well to assist Providence on occasion by judicious action; she would therefore effect a change of front, even in face of the enemy. First, she wrote inviting the Safferys again to tea, though at the risk of incurring her son's anger. Farther, she determined on enlisting Laura on her side by imparting to her the extreme anxiety she felt for the Bingley alliance.

She assured herself that there could be no objection to this, as whatever might be the state of the gentleman's feelings, the lady's were as yet quite untouched.

She opened the proceedings judiciously by dwelling on the longing she had always had for a daughter, and the grief she experienced at her son's refusal to provide her with one.

‘Do you think he will ever marry, dear Laura? I’m afraid not.’

‘I really cannot form any opinion on such a subject, Lady Emily.’

‘It is so unfortunate; for there is Miss Bingley, such a charming girl! And I had quite set my heart on his marrying her. She is in every way suited to him, so sensible, quiet, and clever; not clever in your way, you know, my dearest Laura—she is not so bright and quick and vivacious; but in a solid sterling way she is remarkably clever’ (this was very gratifying), ‘and so suited to my darling Harold, who likes quiet reserved girls. Haven’t you noticed that he does, my dear?’

‘I have not seen him much with girls, you see; but if he likes them quiet, I should say Miss Bingley would suit him admirably.’

‘You are quite right, as you always are, my dear. I was sure you would agree with

me. I have asked the Bingleys here to luncheon on Sunday; they often come to Melbury church, and now that I am well enough to go down to the dining-room, which I hope to do on Sunday—I always like to make a beginning on Sunday—it will be more convenient for them to stay here between the services, and you will be able to judge how nice she really is. I should like to know your opinion of her.’

Laura’s slight acquaintance with the lady in question had not left a favourable impression on her mind, nor did a farther intimacy tend to modify that impression.

Miss and Mrs. Bingley—the mother is named after the daughter, for she really was merely an appurtenance to that important personage: without her Miss Bingley could not have been; but the latter felt neither respect nor affection for her on that account, only a comfortable sense that her progenitrix was fulfilling her duty in carrying out her child’s behests—Miss and Mrs. Bingley, then, arrived at Melbury on Sunday with much pomp and

circumstance; the rustle of their skirts alone alarmed Laura. Some women always contrive to warn you off by their skirts, just as a rattlesnake does by his tail, or is said to do; for nothing is certain in these days. They metaphorically fill up whatever room they sit in, and, when they move about, make you feel that they are there, and that it behoves you to bear the fact in mind.

Lady Emily had that day gone down for the first time to the drawing-room, where she received her guests with her usual gentle and polished courtesy. They were lavish in their expressions of sorrow for her illness, and in congratulations on her recovery. Even the impassive Miss Bingley thawed a little, and her mother was quite overcome—partly because she had a heart, and was genuinely fond of Lady Emily, partly because the sight of the suite of rooms in which she fully expected to see her daughter reign, at some day not too far distant, always affected her.

Whenever she could do so unobserved by her domestic tyrant, who ruled her with a rod

of iron, she expanded into little warm gushes of feeling, of which her hostess was the object, keeping, however, an eye on her offspring, in order to avoid the risk of detection ; for Miss Bingley was wont sternly to repress her parent's gushing propensities. Being herself happily devoid of heart, she never felt the need of *épanchement* ; being also devoid of imagination, she could not understand that others could experience a need which did not trouble her.

Laura was sitting beside Lady Emily, and after the first greetings were over the latter said,

‘I think you know my dear young friend Miss Erle, Mrs. Bingley. Laura, my dear, you know Mrs. Bingley.’

The two guests looked over Laura with that insolent stare affected by the type of woman who mistakes rudeness for good breeding, and fancies herself a fine lady.

The Bingleys were not *nouveaux riches* ; they had lived from time immemorial in the county, and had every claim to be fine ladies,

if they thought that form of development admirable. Unfortunately, it is sometimes seen that it is just the people who have this claim who fail to vindicate it. If by 'a fine lady' be meant one who feels so confident of her own position that she can afford to be courteous, refined, and considerate for others on all occasions, Miss Bingley, certainly, did not justify her claim.

Her conception of the *rôle* was a more comprehensive one. It included unfeeling, coarse, and often cruel discourtesy to those whom she considered her social inferiors. She carried out her conception admirably now. Her cool impertinence to Laura left nothing to be desired.

'Wha-aut did you say?' she drawled, opening her eyes lazily, as if the exertion needed to do so overpowered her, in answer to a question she had heard perfectly; and on Laura's repeating it, 'A-ah, raily' (in ordinary speech 'really') 'I daun't knaw;' which was not the case, to put it mildly, as Miss Erle had only asked her if she found it cold

in church, and Miss Bingley had been shivering during the whole service.

At luncheon both mother and daughter were pointedly rude to her, and on their return to the drawing-room, finding she could be of little use in helping to entertain guests who declined to be entertained by her, she left them, telling Lady Emily she was going to church. It was a wet drizzling day, so bad that Laura had not been out in the morning, and as Mrs. Bingley was going to the second service in her carriage, Lady Emily said suggestively,

‘My dear, it is so wet for you to walk,—perhaps Mrs. Bingley,’ looking at the lady, ‘would take you.’

Wishing, if possible, to ascertain whether their rudeness had been intentional or merely accidental, Laura waited to see what response Mrs. Bingley would make. That lady muttered something; but Miss Bingley, more courageous, said that they had their maid with them, and could not find room for a fourth person.

Satisfied that their slights had been offered with intent, though quite at a loss to account for them, Laura assuring Lady Emily that she could walk without inconvenience—she had her waterproof, &c., left the room with the half-angry, half-amazed sensation of a girl who, having always been made much of and surrounded with tender consideration, suddenly encounters gratuitous and unexpected rudeness.

In the hall she was amused to see Harold peeping carefully round the corner, as if to ascertain whether the coast were clear.

On perceiving her alone, he came forward, a joyful look on his face.

‘Where are they?’ with a nod indicating the visitors.

‘In the drawing-room.’

‘Are they going soon?’

‘I don’t think so ; they are waiting to see you.’

‘They may wait,’ with a smile which made him look very pleasant, ‘unless indeed you think they will tire my mother.’

‘They are going to church, so they cannot stay very much longer.’

‘To church? Oh! And you—where are you going?’ with a keen glance at her face, burning from the contact with Miss Bingley’s ideas of fine-ladyism.

‘To church too.’

‘With them?’

‘No; I shall walk.’

‘What, in this weather? Just look! That thick mist and drizzle will chill you through.’

‘Oh, no; I shall wrap-up well.’ And with a farewell nod and smile, she ran upstairs.

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN Miss Erle left Mr. Carew in the hall he walked to the window, looked out at the fast-thickening mist, paused doubtfully, and then followed her up to the boudoir. She was standing by the fire, collecting her ideas about Miss Bingley, when he came in, with just a little hesitation, as if beginning an unaccustomed thing.

‘Miss Erle, I have come to see if I have any influence over you. Let me persuade you not to go to church. Look!’ taking her hand and leading her to the window, ‘that drizzle is turning into heavy rain; you will get wet through.’

‘But I have not been to church to-day.’

‘Never mind; you will be none the worse for that. It is not fit for you to go, really.’

It did look dismal in the thick white mist,

which was fast blotting out the features of the landscape and blurring 'the happy autumn fields,' while the pretty boudoir with its blazing fire was bright and tempting.

'I'm going to decide for you,' he said, smiling. 'I see that you are of a most vacillating disposition.'

'You said the other day I was obstinate.'

'The two things are not incompatible. You will not be obstinate now, however, but take my advice and stay at home; and if you will sing to me, you will be doing a far better work than going to church and catching cold.'

'Miss Bingley will accuse me of saying one thing and doing another. I said I was going to church.'

'Are you afraid of what Miss Bingley may say of you?'

'Miss Bingleys are very dangerous people sometimes, Mr. Carew.'

'I should despise anything they said, and should have supposed you would do the same.'

'Perhaps I do; but—you will say I am

weak the next time you are at a loss for an accusation against me.'

'No; I am never unjust. It is not weakness to take good advice.'

'You modestly assume that yours is so, though you have just been telling me I shall be none the worse for not going to church.'

'You know very well that you do not attach any superstitious value to the mere act of going to church, and if I let you go, at least without protest, I should be guilty of a breach of the sixth commandment.'

'How so?'

'You have a bad cough—you seem to me never to be free from one—yet you go out most imprudently in all weathers and get wet through; in fact, you take no care of yourself whatever.'

'I am so strong that nothing hurts me.'

'Are you strong?' he asked, a little anxiously. 'You sometimes look so delicate; you should not play with your health. I have been meaning to speak to you on the subject for some time. I don't think my mother is

careful enough of you, so I must take you in hand myself. If you go home looking ill Mrs. Erle won't let you come again, which would be a terrible thing for us.'

Laura felt suddenly uneasy. Why was he thus solicitous about her? Why would he not go down to the drawing-room?

'I wish you would go and talk to Miss Bingley for a little while,' she said.

'Why should I do that?' in a tone of surprise.

'Then they might go, and I don't want your mother to be tired.'

'You think the sight of me would drive them away, as it does you; but it wouldn't—I know by experience.'

'Still, I wish you would go.'

'I will see about it then, if you wish it, but you must sing to me first;' opening the piano. 'Why should you want me to go down to her?'

'You did behave so badly at luncheon, Mr. Carew,' she said, remonstrance in her yes, though she was hardly able to avoid

laughing at the recollection of his gloomy bored aspect, as he had sat launching sarcasms, careless whom they hit ; not quite careless, however. She was conscious that not one had been aimed at her ; she was also conscious how much pleasanter he looked now, as he bent his glossy black head towards her, a genial smile on his dark face and much tenderness in his voice, than when he had to make company for Miss Bingley and provide her with talk suited to her capacity. The effort of doing so fatigued him to such an extent that gradually he assumed quite a satanic aspect under it. The difficulty of bringing himself down from the lofty and scholarly heights on which he habitually dwelt, to find a subject suited to her feminine comprehension, was almost too much for him. With Laura he was never conscious of these downward flights ; the stimulating desire to lecture her and quarrel with her, thereby evoking rejoinders, broke his descent, so that he did not feel it.

‘ Did I behave badly at luncheon ? ’ he said, after a pause, in answer to Laura’s remark.

‘My mother wants me to marry Miss Bingley.’

‘But that should be a reason for behaving better, not worse.’

‘No; she always makes me feel inclined to behave badly, as you call it. I could never marry her. She is not at all the kind of lady I should like for a wife,’ in a tone of boyish simplicity.

‘I am sorry for that. Lady Emily is very fond of her.’

‘She thinks she is; she is not, really. She is fond of you,’ naïvely; ‘the other is make-believe.’

‘I do not think so.’

‘I am sure of it; but even if it were not, you would not say I am bound to marry a lady whom I do not like, merely to please my mother.’

‘Certainly not; it would be wrong and cruel to give such advice, supposing you would take it, which you would not;’ with a smile.

‘No, I should not, even from you, were it possible you could give it. My opinion of

your sex is such that I think a man's life may be, and constantly is, made or marred by the woman he marries.'

'Marriage is such a serious thing,' said Laura, remembering poor Violet; 'and yet people rush into it as if they could get out of it again as they do out of an uncomfortable house.'

'A lady who makes a hasty, ill-considered marriage is much to blame,' he said, after a pause; 'but for a man who does so there is no excuse. I should be doing very wrong if I married Miss Bingley.'

'A farther acquaintance might make you change your opinion about that. It would be worth trying, if only for your mother's sake; for though you certainly should not marry merely to please her, I do think you would not be happy unless she liked your wife.'

'I am sure I should not, but no length of acquaintance would make me like Miss Bingley.'

'You cannot form a fair opinion of her if you never speak to her.'

‘I do speak to her.’

‘Only to say things that alarm her dreadfully.’

‘Oh! nothing alarms her; however, as you command me, I will go down and talk to her; but I warn you it will not alter my opinion. Now you must make up for the scolding you have given me, by singing as you promised.’

‘I didn’t scold you, Mr. Carew.’

‘Not at all; you only told me I behaved badly, and was, in fact, very rude. Will you think me rude, too, if I don’t stand beside you while you sing?’

‘Not at all; if you did, I should ask you to go away.’

‘I’m so glad. I never tried to turn over the pages for a lady but once, and then I knocked the whole concern down.’

‘But, Mr. Carew, you speak as if I could sing like a professor: do you know, I have not had half a dozen singing-lessons in my life.’

‘That does not matter; my knowledge

of music is not scientific. I know what pleases me, and your voice does. It is beautiful.'

She began by playing, and then sang, he walking up and down at first, and afterwards throwing himself on the sofa, intense enjoyment in his face; neither reflecting that the tones of that deep rich contralto penetrated far away beyond the walls of the boudoir.

They reached the drawing-room, where Mrs. and Miss Bingley were still sitting, the heavy rain having stopped their church-going as well as Laura's.

'I hope Laura will not think of going out,' said Lady Emily. 'She will get so wet.'

'Does she sing?' asked Miss Bingley. 'If she does, she is certainly not gone, for I hear singing.'

'Ah, then she is not gone; but she may still do so. Would it be troubling you too much to ring the bell, my dear? I must send and beg her not to go.'

'Shall I go up and tell her not to go? Where is she?—in your boudoir?'

Miss Bingley felt great curiosity to know whether Laura was singing—alone.

‘That would be most kind of you, my dear. Say, that I beg she will not go out this wet afternoon.’

Miss Bingley, in her ample rustling skirts, went up stairs, and as she went the rich voice came to meet her, stronger and clearer in its beauty; but its wonderful tones awoke no feeling in her save one of dislike to its possessor.

Let no one blame her. She, not less than Violet Ellis, had been made to pass through the fire to Moloch, and if she came out hardened and debased, what wonder? The *chasse au mari* was the object of her life, and when she saw the animal she thought she had all but trapped lured away from her by a stranger—an interloper who had dared to poach on a manor to which Miss Bingley considered that she had not, by right of birth, the *entrée*—she felt towards her precisely as Mr. Bingley, magistrate for the county of ——, felt towards

the poacher who trapped his game or attacked his keeper.

A bird in the air tells every secret: that which is done in the closet is proclaimed on the housetop; and Harold's devotion to his mother's attractive guest had for some time been the great topic of the servants' hall and housekeeper's room.

Those evening visits were especially commented on — not ill-naturedly, for Laura was a favourite in the household; still they were commented on, and the comments spread to the lodge, and to the farm, and to the gardener's cottage; and the gardener's daughter was Miss Bingley's maid, so they spread to the Manor, not losing as they went.

By the time they reached Miss Bingley they had attained to formidable dimensions. 'Mr. Carew was so devoted to Miss Erle that he spent the whole day with her, and at night sat with her till one o'clock, when Lady Emily thought he was in bed and every one else too. Poor Miss Scott, her ladyship's maid, was

quite worn out, sitting up so late every night, for she had to wait to undress Miss Erle.'

The foundation for this elaborate structure was that Harold had really stayed one night till half-past eleven, and Scott, who had been enjoined by her lady always to see that Laura did not want anything, thinking the latter had either fallen asleep or forgotten to ring for her, went to see what had happened, and found Harold still talking, neither he nor Laura knowing it was so late.

The opinion women secretly entertain of men always comes out unconsciously in a case of this kind. *He* is looked on as the victim by the unanimous consent of the world's wife—the poor, weak, defenceless, almost passive victim; while *she*—the active wrongdoing has all been hers; she is the strong artful tempter.

Miss Bingley knew nothing of, and had she known, would not have believed in, Laura's efforts to avoid Harold, and set her down at once as 'designing.'

An impecunious girl gifted with the power

of attracting men is almost sure to be called 'designing' by more prosperous but less fascinating women; and that word, in the estimation of such, is of indefinite signification, and may imply or include any possible breach of the laws laid down in the last table of the Decalogue.

What but 'designing' could Laura be when she allowed a gentleman to sit talking to her till one o'clock in the morning? Miss Bingley felt that it was almost compromising to speak to her; but that did not prevent a keen desire to learn something more of her proceedings.

The sight which met her on opening the boudoir-door was one that might well horrify a well-brought-up young woman emulous of settlements: Laura at the piano, singing for the edification of a gentleman lying full length on the sofa in divine enjoyment, and both apparently forgetful that the world contained other persons than themselves. That the gentleman could assume such an attitude in her presence showed, however, in how little re-

spect he held the singer. That was some consolation.

‘I beg your pardon! I thought you were alone,’ said the new-comer, a look of well-feigned surprise in her eyes. ‘Lady Emily begged me to ask you not to go to church in the rain. I may tell her that you will not do so?’ significantly.

‘Oh, thank you!’ returned Laura innocently, too much accustomed to the society of her brothers and her brothers’ friends to think there could be anything reprehensible in singing for half an hour to a gentleman who asked her to do so; ‘I am not going.’

‘As you said you were when you left us, she was uneasy;’ with an accent on the ‘said’ which provoked Harold, he hardly knew why. He had stood up on Miss Bingley’s entrance.

‘I persuaded Miss Erle to stay at home; it was quite unfit for her to go out.’

He spoke in his haughtiest tone, and Laura felt it was a defiance flung at the disturber of his peace.

‘It looks more comfortable here than out

of doors,' she remarked, wishing to be conciliatory; 'won't you sit down?'

'No, tha-a-anks; I only came to give that message. I should not think of leaving Lady Emily;' and she rustled away.

'You ought to go down with her,' urged Laura.

'I sha'n't,' he answered, in the tone of a spoiled child.

'But, Mr. Carew, you promised; you said you would if I sang. Do go, and be good and reasonable, and tell Lady Emily I am not going to church.'

'Come down with me, and I will go with pleasure.'

'No, I would rather not go down;' recalling Miss Bingley's amenities; 'but that is no reason why you should not keep your promise.'

'Very well; I will go as you command me, but it is only to please you, and not to discover any one else's perfections. I can never forgive Miss Bingley for having interrupted your beautiful music. I cannot ex-

press to you how I have liked it! Will you sing to me another time?’

‘Yes, yes; only go now.’

‘As this is your room, I think it is very unkind of you to wish to get rid of me; uselessly too, I must tell you, for I shall never find out Miss Bingley’s good qualities.’

He went at last, and Laura sat down to think, seeing plainly that matters were growing serious. Till that day nothing in Harold’s manner had given rise to uneasiness in her mind; now she could hardly mistake it.

To be the cause of disagreement between him and his mother was abhorrent to her; and she knew how Lady Emily would receive any proposal that she should accept her as a daughter-in-law; moreover, no consideration would induce her—Laura—to enter a family into which she would not be cordially welcomed.

Besides all this she had absolutely no feeling beyond mere liking for Harold himself. He was very pleasant, and had been most

kind to her, but her one venture into Arcadia had not been of a nature to make her desirous of undertaking a second.

Henceforth she would live out of that land of mingled storm and sunshine; but in case Harold might wish to take up his abode there, with her for a companion, she resolved to return home without loss of time.

Lady Emily was now better; she had been nearly two months at Melbury, and could with truth plead that she was wanted at home.

Having reached this conclusion she went down-stairs, where in the hall she again saw Harold, peeping round a corner to ascertain if the visitors had departed.

‘Are they gone?’ he whispered.

‘Yes; the carriage has just driven off.’

He came forward with a relieved look.

‘Why were you not with them?’ she asked reproachfully.

‘I did my duty, I assure you,’ eagerly; ‘even you would have said I was good; but I couldn’t stay there the whole afternoon, and

I didn't see her perfections, because, like the Spanish fleet, they were not in sight.'

'“Yet;” you forget that little word, Mr. Carew.'

'They never will be to me,' gravely; 'and therefore I felt that I was sailing under false colours all the time; but I kept my promise to you, only you must not exact such another from me.'

He went with her into the drawing-room.

'I was rewarded for my good conduct in one way,' he continued. 'The Bingleys are going to —— to hear the *Messiah*; and I hope mother may arrange for you to go with them, so you will not be disappointed after all. You can manage it, mother, eh?'

'Well, dear, I don't know.'

'There can be no difficulty, surely. Miss Erle will be nominally with Mrs. Bingley; really I will take care of her. I shall keep you in strict order, mind,' with a smile and glance at the young lady, 'and not allow you to go out and get wet, and I will see that you are not disturbed by untimely criticisms.'

Lady Emily replied that nothing was positively settled yet about the Bingleys going; Mrs. Bingley would write, &c.

Nothing could be kinder than Lady Emily's manner; she was as gentle, courteous, tender, and affectionate as ever; but Laura had been sensible of a change, nevertheless, the moment she entered the room. It would be impossible to say in what the change consisted; there was no outward sign of it; it was too subtle for words to define, and could have been perceived only by one so exquisitely sensitive to every variation of mood or feeling in those about her that, in her intercourse with them, language was an absolute superfluity, so far as it is used as a medium for conveying all the finer shades of thought and sentiment.

Laura was instantly conscious that something had come between her and her friend, and the latter knew too that her guest's delicate perception had discovered this; for she too was as keenly sensitive as the girl who had come, by that which some people

would call chance, to occupy so large a portion of her heart and thoughts.

These unexpected meetings occur from time to time in our lives, modifying or perhaps altering their whole course. Less than two years before, Lady Emily Carew had never even heard of Laura Erle. Now she was profoundly distressed because the latter perceived that there was some almost indefinable shadow of distrust towards her in her mind; for it was only a shadow, and would pass away, leaving as little trace. The insight given by strong affection and sympathetic generosity of heart made Lady Emily perfectly certain that Laura was incapable of base unworthy 'designs;' but as a looking-glass retains for a few fleeting moments the dimness caused by some passing breath, so slander cannot breathe its poisoned words into even the noblest soul without dimming momentarily its pure brightness. The dimness passes away. Suspicion cannot lurk in really generous minds, but while it lingers it gives exquisite pain, not only to him who

harbours it, but to the person who is its object.

After Harold had 'done his duty' that afternoon, and had gone away, wearied out with the heroic effort, Mrs. and Miss Bingley had skilfully dropped insinuation after insinuation against Laura, implying how much they could say if they would; then, on Lady Emily asking for an explanation, and expressing her strong dislike of innuendo, or the pointed silence—one of slander's most murderous weapons—which kills without words, they spoke of the reports that had reached them, of Harold's prolonged evening visits to Laura, of his walks by her side when she was out driving (he had met her twice in the pony carriage, and had on each occasion accompanied her some little way); finally Miss Bingley described the scene in the boudoir that afternoon.

'Of course I should not have said anything, only you insisted on it, Lady Emily; but as it has been spoken of, it is better to be honest, isn't it, mamma? And after all,

it is so natural that she should wish to marry Mr. Carew—such a much better match than she has any right to expect, only we doubted whether you knew what was going on.’

Lady Emily repudiated—and felt that she could do so honestly—all idea of ‘design’ on Laura’s part, and, to the Bingleys, defended her warmly; nevertheless the breath of their words left its stain. It was not that she believed anything that had been said, so far as Laura was concerned; but she did believe that Harold was much—she feared very much—attracted by her.

He showed an eagerness to take her to hear this music painfully suggestive of an overpowering desire to please and gratify her. She had never before seen him so occupied with a lady, so ready to enter into discussions with her, quarrelling, it is true; but then the mother knew well what such quarrels portend—more fatal reconciliations,—teasing her, bearing patiently and delightedly her snubbings and contradictions, and showing himself altogether so gentle, winning, and affectionate to

her as to his own mother,—with a difference, —which Lady Emily clearly felt, but could not define.

And he was so happy! When he came into the room and saw Laura his face would brighten, and he would sit down with a look of satisfied delight. ‘Your very humble servant, Miss Erle. I conclude I owe the pleasure of seeing you to the fact that this room has but one door. If it had two, I should expect to see you walk out at one as I come in at the other. Shall I have a ladder placed at the window to enable you to avoid me with greater certainty?’ or ‘May your beautiful shadow never be less, Miss Erle! I have been looking for you for the last hour. You are as difficult to stalk as a deer. See here;’ and he would sit down near her, or leaning over the back of a chair, engage in a pitched battle with her.

His mother felt much compunction at depriving him of his beautiful plaything; it was the first time she had ever denied him anything; but she strengthened herself by repeating that it was for his real good.

When Laura found herself alone with Lady Emily that same Sunday she spoke of her wish to return home. This wish was, as has been seen, quite genuine, yet not the less was she hurt at the alacrity with which her proposal was accepted.

As the evening wore on, however, and as Lady Emily began to realise what Melbury would be without Laura's brightness and gaiety, she became much depressed, and the latter could not but be mollified. Harold was very full of the expedition to —, on which he had quite set his heart; but *homme propose, femme dispose*. He might set his heart on what he pleased; Mrs. and Miss Bingley and his mother had fully resolved that Laura should not go; and when three ladies resolve to prevent a thing it is pretty sure not to happen. All the same he went on with his anticipations of coming pleasure, and no one said a word.

Laura did not mention her approaching departure to him, neither did Lady Emily.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE following day Mr. and Miss Saffery came to tea in the afternoon. The moment Laura saw them she perceived that something unusual was the matter. Mr. Saffery from being a pink billiard-ball had become a red one; he was also suffering much from heat, and rubbed and polished his poor face and head till they shone again.

After they had walked about for a little while, Miss Saffery, complaining of fatigue, begged to sit down on an iron seat at the end of the lawn, full in front of all the windows.

‘My dear young lady,’ she began, with a cough, which must have come from the very centre of nervousness, ‘you who are accomplished and clever—I may say, indeed, without flattery, an honour to your sex’ (‘What can be coming?’ mentally ejaculated the honour to

her sex)—‘must be aware that it has in all ages been the custom of great men to employ, at certain important epochs of their lives, the services of a third party, as a medium, so to express it, between themselves and any other person to whom they may have weighty communications to impart. This medium may be called a spokesman—or, on occasion, a spokeswoman. The case of Moses who was divinely authorised to employ Aaron as a mouthpiece, owing to his own slowness of speech, will at once occur to you. Following that great leader of the Israelites—one of our own national leaders, as I firmly believe,’ here Mr. Saffery gave a warning cough, and the lady added hurriedly—‘but on that I will not dwell—my dear and excellent brother, who holds, I may say with all truth, as distinguished a position among his own sex as you do among yours, has deputed me to convey a request to your fair ear—a request to which I myself most sincerely hope that you will accede.’

‘What is it, Miss Saffery?’ asked Laura, beginning to be seriously alarmed; for Mr.

Saffery had taken off his hat, and in a sudden access of heat was mopping himself violently with a handkerchief which rivalled his face in brightness.

‘The married state is one into which my excellent brother has never yet entered,’ resumed the lady, ‘nor had he, till quite recently, any intention of doing so at all, but God, the God of Israel’ (a cough from Mr. Saffery), ‘sometimes sends angels commissioned to bear to His favoured people special messages. To refuse to accept their message would be to sin against a merciful Father, and, as my brother cannot doubt that you have been sent by God to—’

‘Miss Saffery, I really must beg—No one ever felt less like an angel or the bearer of a matrimonial message than I do. I am quite sure Mr. Saffery would be miserable in less than a month with me for a wife,’ interrupted Laura, divided between excessive annoyance and a suffocating desire to laugh. To be held thus imprisoned between two people bent on looking on her as an angelic visitant was a

situation sufficiently trying to a young lady whose risible muscles were always easily set in motion.

The sudden way in which she had interrupted Miss Saffery disconcerted the latter not a little. The speech had been written out by Mr. Saffery with great deliberation and thought, and learned by her with much diligence and many promises not to alter or interpolate a single syllable in the repeating of it; but human nature cannot be driven out by a pitchfork or any other fork — least of all feminine human nature; and Miss Saffery, her promises notwithstanding, could not resist putting in some few phrases and ideas of her own as she went on, which may account for the apparent incongruities of her pleading. The flowers of speech were all the gentleman's; the allusion to the chosen people the lady's.

When Laura cut short her oration to disclaim her own angelic mission, the rest of the discourse went entirely out of Miss Saffery's head, and for a moment she was disconcerted; then, with the quickness of genius to seize its

opportunities, she saw that this was really the time for action. She could now trust to her own judgment and powers of persuasion, on which, though admitting that she was the weaker vessel, she yet set a due feminine value.

She at once took the affair out of the domain of the ludicrous and invested it with a real pathetic interest, by pleading her brother's cause with a genuine desire for his success which was infinitely touching, seeing that that success might easily imperil her own happiness, and must in any case materially alter her position in his house, even if she continued to dwell under the same roof with him at all.

While she spoke, the expectant bridegroom sat, much mopping himself in his supreme nervousness, and unable to utter a word; he could only look and gasp, and breathe so loudly, that the object of his expectations seriously apprehended a fit of apoplexy.

He cannot be said to have been a tempting aspirant for the favour of a young lady of romantic tendencies and refined tastes.

When Miss Saffery, having exhausted all her arguments, had yet failed to produce any effect, she addressed her chief: 'Brother, you must now speak for yourself,' she said.

'It would be useless, indeed!' exclaimed poor Laura, strongly desirous of running away. She would have done so had it not been for the firm conviction she felt that, had she attempted to move, her adorer would instantly have precipitated himself on his knees before her, and as, owing to the stiffness consequent on age, he would probably be unable to rise again without assistance, she would be driven to the necessity of either helping him up herself, or perhaps calling in the aid of the servants to set her elderly suitor on his feet once more. Either alternative would be embarrassing, as they were commanded by half the windows in the house.

But, though unable to articulate, Mr. Saffery was not entirely passive. He seized his beloved's hand to raise it to his lips, thereby arousing her deepest wrath; for unless a girl be in some way attracted by a man, she is apt

to consider him guilty of an impertinence in proposing to her. In intense disgust Laura snatched away her hand, and, springing up, regardless of consequences—‘What you ask is an impossibility!’ she exclaimed; ‘I thank you for the honour you have done me, but I cannot meet your wishes. I must go to Lady Emily.’

She left them, tears of anger and annoyance in her eyes. On the steps she met Harold, looking gloomy and discontented, as he always did during a Saffery visitation.

‘Where is Lady Emily?’ she asked, too much preoccupied to notice his mood.

‘In the drawing-room. What is the matter?’

‘It is too bad; it is insulting!’ almost unconscious of what she was saying. ‘Mr. Saffery—’

‘What?’

‘He—he—wants me to marry him!’ in a tone of astounded exasperation.

‘Confound his impertinence!’ exclaimed Harold, the gloom giving place to lively anger.

‘Can you conceive such a thing?’ she went on, too much excited to care to whom she was speaking; ‘and getting his sister to propose for him! Just fancy me married to a man who hadn’t even the courage to ask me himself, but sat mopping his head and gasping for breath’—dashing angry tears out of her eyes—‘and his stupidity of a sister thinking I ought to feel honoured by the prospect of being Mrs. Saffery of Snail Farm—’ with infinite contempt, looking for sympathy in her outraged feeling to her tall interlocutor.

‘Confound him! If his sister were not with him I’d kick him off the premises.’

‘And he tried to kiss my hand!’

‘Scoundrel! you didn’t let him!’

‘No, thank Providence; I escaped. There, they are coming in! What shall I do?’

‘Go up-stairs,’ he said, in a tone of soothing tenderness, which, at the moment, she was too much excited to notice; ‘I will send them away, and let you know when they are gone.’

‘No; you will quarrel with them.’

‘I will not. Go up-stairs. I will not do anything you can object to’—with dignified firmness, as one who suddenly feels a responsibility.

It was no longer a case of mere literary controversy with Mr. Saffery.

As she was going to her room she met the servant with the letters just come by the second post.

She opened mechanically one from Amy, and began reading it, still tingling all over with annoyance.

But a few lines, and all thought of Mr. Saffery vanished. Her mother was ill, and her father seemed to be falling again into the state in which he had been the preceding year. Lady Emily being better, Amy urged Laura to return as soon as she possibly could, as all the responsibility fell on her, and she was in hourly need of Laura’s experience and assistance.

CHAPTER XIV.

MEANTIME, Harold had met Mr. and Miss Saffery with a dignity of manner and aspect very different from the somewhat boyish petulance with which he had hitherto treated them when he had been forced into communication with them. Even his mother was sensible of a change on his bringing them into the drawing-room.

Miss Saffery wished to acquaint Lady Emily with Mr. Saffery's matrimonial intentions, and to request her intercession with Laura. 'It was possible that it had been a mistake on her brother's part, not having spoken himself; but if Lady Emily would explain to the young lady that it was only a sense of her transcendent merits which had kept him from doing so, and ask her to afford him an opportunity of pleading his

cause in person, the interview might have a different result.

Miss Saffery showed plainly how foolish she considered Laura's decision, intimating that she could only have come to it from having failed to appreciate fully the advantages of the marriage when first proposed to her; and hinting that it would be a kindness to give her an opportunity of retrieving her mistake.

Lady Emily listened in silence and secret disappointment. She had looked on the Saffery alliance as the solution of all her difficulties; it would keep Laura with her, yet effectually separate her from Harold.

That a sensible woman, such as she in many respects was, should have thought it probable that a girl like Laura would accept Mr. Saffery, no matter what his worldly advantages, may seem wonderful, unless it be borne in mind how constantly certain sanguine persons make their own wishes, not common sense, the measure of the actions of those with whom they have to do.

She promised now to speak to Laura, assuring Miss Saffery that her brother had her own warmest wishes.

While this conversation was going on between the ladies, Harold was entertaining Mr. Saffery in another part of the room. It may be thought that the latter would have seized this auspicious moment for plunging into the great camp controversy; but, like Harold, his mind was full of a more overpowering interest. The camp was all very well, but it was tame and dull compared to that lively daughter of Eve who was just now uppermost in both gentlemen's thoughts.

Before Laura Mr. Saffery had been dumb, but he poured forth to Harold the story of his rejected love.

Despite the fierce disgust he felt, and the strong desire to carry out that action of which he had spoken to Miss Erle, Mr. Carew maintained an air of decent attention and calmness, though the expression of his face would not have borne criticism.

He even muttered some indistinct words,

which may have been anathema or sympathy; but when the suitor went on to say that he hoped for greater success on another occasion, it was more than he could stand; and had not Miss Saffery risen just then to depart, it is not easy to say what disastrous consequences might not have ensued.

The instant they were gone, he burst forth to his mother in indignant protest against 'Saffery's impertinence.' 'Why you encourage or tolerate such a fellow about the place, mother, I can't conceive!'

In a tone of the most gentle calmness, which at that moment aggravated him inconceivably, Lady Emily expressed great regret and surprise at Laura's rejection of such an offer, which was as good as she could reasonably expect to receive.

He uttered an exclamation of extreme surprise.

'I am amazed that you can even think of her in connection with a fool like that!'

'My dear, I consider him a very worthy

man ; he would make her an excellent husband, and in a money point of view the match is in every way desirable.'

'Mother, you can't be serious ; it would be wicked to throw away that beautiful girl on a fool like Saffery.'

'Now, Harold, my darling boy, I really must beg of you not to attempt to put any spoke in good Mr. Saffery's wheel. He will speak to Laura again, when I hope she may reconsider her decision. If she is to be so fastidious, she will not marry at all. She has already refused Claude Dashwood.'

'She was quite right.'

'Yes ; I think in that instance she was ; but Mr. Saffery is another thing ; and it would be a real happiness to me to have her near me.'

Lady Emily regretted that last remark the moment she had made it. Harold walked round to the back of the sofa, and, stooping over her in the tender fashion so dear to her, kissed her affectionately.

'Dearest mother, you can have her near

you in another and a better way. You have always been wanting me to marry.'

'O Harold!' The words came out with a sort of cry.

'Why "O Harold," mother?' coming round so that he could see her face. 'You are anxious that I should marry: even when you do not urge it in words, you let me see well enough what your wishes are; now I am ready to meet them.'

'I do not want you to marry Laura Erle, Harold.'

'Then, mother, you should not have had Laura Erle here.'

That was hardly fair. He had had his thoughts full of Laura Erle before his mother ever saw her.

'She came because I was ill, and so lonely,' pleaded the lady.

'I know you were, dear mother,' kissing her, 'and you should have sent for me; but you shall never be lonely again, if I can help it.'

'Then have you spoken to her?'

‘No, I have not ; but I should like to do so.’

‘And have you reason to suppose she—she returns your feeling?’

‘Not the least,’ smiling ; ‘so, after all, I may be counting without my host ; but I shall try. I have as much right to do that as Saffery—eh, mother?’

Two tears rolled down Lady Emily’s face. He looked annoyed.

‘I can’t understand this, mother,’ he said in a distressed tone, sitting down again beside her. ‘What can your objection be? You have, in fact, chosen your own daughter. What did you expect, when you twice brought here for long visits such a girl as that? I am human, mother ; or did you think no girl could ever like me?’

‘I have had Frances Bingley here too, Harold, and have hoped more than I can say that you—’

‘Mother, Miss Bingley may have every virtue under the sun—I daresay she has ; but she has not one quality that attracts me.’

‘She is charming, Harold, and so handsome!’

‘I don’t care a straw for looks, and I quite deny that she is charming. To me she is dulness incarnate.’

‘You always said you liked a quiet girl.’

‘That was because I had never met a talkative one.’

‘Laura’s temper is very quick.’

‘So much the better: she will keep us from stagnating. Be reasonable, mother. What can I offer you better than that good head and that kind and generous heart? And as to looks—to my mind there could not be a prettier or more graceful girl, and so bright and lovable. You admit that you can’t help loving her yourself, yet you expect me to do so; you want to keep her near you, and yet to separate me from her for ever. That is not like you, mother.’

‘The cases are different. It is a match so altogether inferior to the one you might make—quite unsuited to your position. You will not think I would say a word against Laura

herself: she is all that any one could wish a girl to be ; her quick temper is the only shadow of a fault I see in her ; but she is one of a very poor and very large family.'

'And is no one to marry her because she is poor, and has brothers and sisters? That would be a reason if I were poor too ; but it is rather hard on both of us if I may not share what I have with one who, according to your own showing, is just the girl to whom a rich marriage is indispensable.'

'I was wrong, very wrong, ever to have had her here,' in a resigned voice of despair.

'Had I never seen her I would not have married Miss Bingley.'

But Lady Emily knew better. A man may be made to marry almost any one, all vows to the contrary notwithstanding, if women set themselves decidedly to make him do it, always provided there be no counteracting feminine influence at work in the background.

He got up and walked about the room.

'It is a matter of amazement to me how you could ever have thought I would do so,'

he went on. 'She is the most uninteresting girl I ever met ; in fact, she never strikes me as being a girl at all.'

'She is two years younger than Laura, who is three-and-twenty,' exclaimed Lady Emily eagerly.

'I should have thought she was three-and-thirty from her sense. A bread-and-butter miss is my utter aversion. What companionship can I find in her? She is like un-ripe fruit.'

'Yet a minute ago you said Frances Bingley was not like a girl. I don't understand you at all.'

'Well, mother, you are only in the position of King Solomon, who, though he had some experience of life, yet admitted that the ways of young men and young women were too much for him. You blessed woman,' sitting down again, and taking her hand between both his with the smile which hitherto had sufficed to reconcile her to any of his eccentricities, 'you often tell me I must be good, which always means that I am to do just what

you wish. Your friend Laura is much given to the use of that same phrase too, I observe,' with a tender softening of his voice; 'now you must be good to please me, mother, and let me have my way about this.'

But no smile could reconcile Lady Emily to this last eccentricity, which, if once indulged in, must necessarily be permanent.

'Such a marriage would break my heart,' she said in a low voice.

He stood up, a look of pained surprise in his face; but before he could reply Laura came into the room.

Having ascertained that the visitors were gone, she had come down to arrange about her journey. Anxiety had almost banished all thought of Mr. Saffery and his proposal from her mind, and she did not even allude to the subject. The necessity for immediate action was welcome to all three, and all three felt that it was well the visit should come to an end at this crisis.

Laura's absorption in her anxiety and feverish eagerness to be home rather damped

Harold's courage. There was not visible a shade of regret at leaving Melbury ; and this, combined with his mother's last remark, effectually prevented his speaking to her on the subject near his heart.

That evening Laura told Lady Emily of Mr. Saffery's proposal, expressing such unfeigned surprise at his having ventured to make it, and at his sister's thinking, as she so evidently did, that it was a high honour, that her hostess felt it impossible just then to urge on her the expediency of accepting it; but she spoke warmly of the delight she should feel in having Laura so comfortably settled near her, and dwelt dexterously on the happiness usually enjoyed by a young wife married to an elderly husband.

'You know the proverb, my dear, don't you, about an old man's darling? not that good Mr. Saffery is old.'

'I know the proverb, Lady Emily ; but I don't accept the alternative: I have no intention whatever of being a young man's slave.'

‘No, my dear ; but a young woman rules an old man so easily.’

‘And a young one, too,’ said the girl, with the triumphant consciousness of power felt by some women. ‘If I ever marry—which I probably shall not—I shall always rule my husband,’ and Miss Laura gave a very significant twist of her finger, which, had he seen it, ought certainly to have been a warning to Mr. Carew, but which, probably—such is masculine fatuity—would only have increased his desire to put himself under the yoke.

When Miss Erle came down the following morning ready for her journey, she found Harold prepared to accompany her. Thinking he was only coming to the station, she made little objection ; but when, on arriving there, she saw him about to take a ticket in order to travel with her, she spoke.

‘I do beg of you not to think of such a thing,’ she said.

‘But I like to go with you.’

‘It is very kind of you to say so, Mr. Carew ; only, as Lady Emily will probably

be feeling lonely just at first, I think it would be better to go back to her.'

'Lady Emily knows I am going with you. She has Miss Bingley coming to luncheon; so now, my Lady Thoughtful, you need not be uneasy. I shall go with you to take care of you and save you the trouble of looking anxiously after your cloaks and umbrella, as you are doing at this moment.'

'Indeed, I would rather you did not,' she said, much distressed, her face suddenly flushing crimson.

'Is that really so? your own genuine wish?' with a keen glance.

'It is indeed; I would rather you went back to your mother.'

His face changed instantly, all the pleasant light going out of his eyes.

'In that case, of course I shall not intrude on you,' in an altered tone.

The train came up, and he saw her in, gravely and silently. His look, as he took off his hat while they moved away, went straight to her heart. She threw herself back in a

corner and burst into tears. The strain was off her mind ; she had got away from Melbury without a *dénouement* of any kind, and now she realised how great the strain had been.

Harold's tone the preceding evening and that morning had been marked by a gentle tenderness which she could not mistake.

'I was coming up to tell you Saffery was gone,' he had said, 'and to give a report of myself. I behaved so well to him that even you would not have been able to find fault with me, though I wished to knock him down more than I ever wished anything in my life.'

But as she noted his tenderness she noted, too, his mother's uneasiness, and her pride and affection were alike wounded. A feverish impatient longing to be away from Melbury made her almost count the minutes which still divided her from the hour of departure.

'I shall breathe freely once I am out of the house,' was her feeling.

She was out of it now, but without the relief she had anticipated. The world seemed a gigantic mistake, with Laura Erle for the most

ungrateful thing in it. How could she, after Harold's kindness, have called that expression into his face by any words of hers?

Love would certainly make a paradise of earth if it did not so often by its caprices, jealousies, and mutabilities, make it the other thing.

Laura was supremely miserable, she hardly knew why. She should miss her perpetual quarrels with Mr. Carew. That much she acknowledged to herself.

* * * * *

When Mr. Carew got back to Melbury he found his mother up, though it was much before her usual time for rising; but she had been too anxious to keep quiet.

If Harold went to — Junction with Laura as he had proposed, what hope was there that she could avert the misfortune she dreaded? Laura might refuse him; that was possible, but it was not a possibility in which the mother had much faith.

‘Well, dearest,’ she exclaimed, greatly

relieved at seeing him so soon, 'did she go off comfortably?'

'I hope so, mother; but as she would not let me go with her I can hardly tell. You will be delighted to hear that she declined my company and my offers of assistance,' bitterly.

Lady Emily looked guilty, and cast about for some harmless remark.

'I am glad she has a bright day for her journey, poor darling!'

'Yes; she has taken all the brightness with her; at least she has left no sunshine here,' and he quitted the room.

Never having been used to have his wishes or fancies thwarted, Mr. Carew was not disposed to suffer in silence.

CHAPTER XV.

THAT winter was a trying one to Laura. Mrs. Erle had a serious illness; and Mr. Erle, though the dreaded attack was averted, yet continued to be a constant source of anxiety to his family. From time to time came rumours, too, that John was not doing so well as he ought to have done.

Mrs. Elliott and Audrey Dashwood were still abroad; so that Laura and her sister had not the relief and distraction their society and sympathy would have afforded.

One day, just after Christmas, the former was standing by the drawing-room window contemplating the possibility or advisability of going out in the raw cold, when 'Mr. Claude Dashwood' was announced. It was long since the familiar words had fallen on her ears. She started violently, but came forward,

genuinely glad to see him, colouring partly with pleasure, partly with embarrassment.

‘How do you do, Laura?’ he said, holding out his hand just as he used to do in the old days. ‘I am grieved that you have had so much illness. I never heard a word about it till this morning, and came over at once to inquire and hear everything from yourself.’ He was holding her hand as he spoke, and looking at her with the compassionate kindness she knew so well.

‘We have had a bad time of it,’ she answered, ‘but I hope the worst is over. Papa is better, and mamma gaining strength, though slowly, I’m afraid.’

‘Would they come and stay with us in London? The change would do them good.’

All this passed in a moment, while they were still standing; then they sat down, and fell into talk, almost as if that great separation had never been. It was like a page out of the old life to both, and for an instant brought the vague fleeting remembrance of past joys, as the scent of certain flowers recalls mysteriously

the memory of happiness enjoyed long since, we know not how or where, in some former existence perhaps. But this could not last; the events of the preceding year and half could not pass from their minds like the scenes and figures from a magic-lantern, giving place to others and leaving no trace.

After the first few seconds of surprise the thoughts of both recurred to their last parting.

‘You look pale,’ said Claude. ‘I’m afraid you have been doing too much. That is an old trick of yours.’

‘I have had a succession of colds,’ looking in her turn at him, but keeping the result of her inspection to herself.

There was a change in him very perceptible to her. Some men grow happier-looking and more genial after marriage; he did not. There was a discontented hard expression about his face, as of one never satisfied, and in whom no gentle thoughts hold sway.

‘You must come for a ride with me; that will do you good,’ he said.

‘I have not ridden for ages; I have so little time now. How is Violet?’

‘Very well. Will you ride over and see her to-morrow? There is the gray, you know, and I would come for you.’

Claude and Violet were staying at Oaklands.

‘No, thank you; I could not be away from home so long; but I should like to see Violet. Could she not come over and see me?’

‘Certainly. We only came down just before Christmas-day, and Violet never told me of all your anxieties till to-day; nor did Audrey mention them in any of her letters. She knew of them, didn’t she?’

‘Yes; both she and Violet have been most kind in writing to inquire.’

‘I think it very unkind of Audrey, and wrong of Violet, not to have told me about you,’ he said bitterly. ‘Why am I to be excluded from everything? All that concerns you and Mr. and Mrs. Erle must interest me. You, no doubt, thought hard things of me, Laura, for not inquiring?’

‘No ; I did not,’ colouring.

‘You did not think about me at all, probably? Your memory is less good than mine.’

‘I often think of you, Claude, and always to wish for your happiness ; but I did not expect you to inquire, or call’—she stopped, recollecting their last interview.

‘I know what you mean ; I was mad then, Laura ; you said it was dreadful to break with your old life ; it has been dreadful to me, too, but there is no need that we should do so,’ passionately ; ‘why should I be the only one not to know you were in trouble?’

He was sitting in a low chair, his arms resting on his knees as he talked, looking at her from time to time, but keeping his eyes chiefly fixed on the carpet. At the last words he rose, and, coming over to her, held out his hand.

‘Will you forgive me, Laura, for any hard things I may have said to you?’

She took his proffered hand frankly.

‘I should be wrong indeed if I did not. I

have often felt since, Claude, that I was much to blame about—about all that—that happened. I was hasty and unforgiving, but you know my horrid temper;’ tears rushing to her eyes.

‘And I—I acted like a madman! I should have given you time.’

He sat down again, resting his elbows on his knees and burying his face in his hands.

He had had a violent quarrel with Violet that morning, and had, not very wisely, started to call on Laura while under the influence of the emotions aroused by the quarrel, and in spite of all his fine theories he was as much the slave of his emotions as the veriest woman whom he despised.

His words and the action so indicative of mental suffering surprised Laura, and distressed her inexpressibly.

The woman’s instinct to offer some consolation was strong within her, but she was uncertain how to offer it. He had spoken of ‘giving her time,’ while she felt, as deeply as

it was possible to feel anything, that her decision respecting him had not been an affair of 'time' at all. No time could have affected it; it had resulted from altogether different causes, and, at that moment, a profound thankfulness that she had been enabled to come to such a decision filled her heart.

'It would have been wiser of Claude not to have made that remark,' was her thought; 'there are regrets which are better unexpressed;' but seeing him sitting there, his head bowed down on his hands, pity swallowed up every other consideration.

'Claude,' she said, very gently, after a pause, 'do not reproach yourself about that—I mean about me. Time could not have affected my decision. I think it is due to every one that that should be plainly understood; we cannot, and ought not, to be friends again unless it is; but though that is so, I am sorry I was hasty and angry. Had I been more forbearing you might have been less precipitate; still, even if you have made a mistake, no mistake is irretrievable.'

‘Mine is,’ he said in a low hoarse voice, without looking up.

‘No, Claude ; we can always be masters of our own lives if only we have courage. Even the worst thing may be made to turn out well by patience and resolution.’

‘You have never felt, or you could not speak so calmly or so confidently,’ he answered, lifting his face from his hands with a look of misery which went straight to her heart.

‘I have felt, Claude,’ she returned gently, ‘very deeply, though not, perhaps, just in your way,—no two human beings ever do feel exactly alike, I suppose, least of all a man and a woman. But in my own way I have felt; and I do still say confidently that we can be masters of our own lives even after we have made horrible mistakes. The present and future are always ours, though the past may have been a failure.’

‘No ; some failures ruin our whole lives.’

She shook her head.

‘I could never accept such a doctrine for man or woman. It would poison the source

of all good in life and thought; it kills hope.'

'How can I retrieve my failure?' he asked almost angrily.

'By making the best of it,' she answered in a tone of gentle compassion. Then, after a pause: 'O Claude, she has so much good in her, and she is anxious to please you and to do her best.'

'She never thinks of me except as a cashier,' he said, with the bitterness of a man whose heart is full of an aching, restless longing for love and affection.

'She does, Claude; and she spoke in the warmest way of your kindness to her, and of your wish to please her and make her happy.'

'She conceals her sense of my conduct admirably from me then,' he returned, still bitterly, but with a softened look.

'Why didn't you bring her here to-day?'

'I rode; and she doesn't care for riding.'

'No; she is nervous; but you might have driven her.'

‘I wanted to see you alone, Laura,—why should I not tell the truth?—to apologise to you.’ ‘To still that maddening longing to see you which tortures me,’ he might have added, but did not.

‘Let us agree to forget all that is painful in the past, and remember only the happy parts,’ she replied. ‘We were both to blame, I think; we cannot undo that; but we can turn it into something other than failure. You once said I blighted your life: I don’t admit that. You see, you never quite understood me, or my way of looking at things. Still, I own that I was wrong in some respects, and I am glad you have forgiven me; but I know that I am not wrong now in telling you that all is not lost, and that—why, Claude, that Violet is a dear little thing, so bright and lovable, and with all sorts of good in her,’ smiling a smile which he thought at that moment angelic.

‘Laura, you are a brave and noble girl,’ he said, ‘and seeing you has been a help to me—greater than you can understand, per-

haps. With Audrey away, and you gone out of my life, it was hard work; but now we are friends again I shall get on. I will bring Violet over to-morrow.'

Then they fell into other talk. She inquired for Sir Digby Forester. That gentleman had, soon after Audrey's departure for the south of France, found a warm climate essential to the welfare of his knee, and had speedily followed his friends. At this Claude laughed, and Laura laughed; and then Amy Erle came in—a young lady gifted with all her sister's quickness, without, as yet, so much of her softness; and Claude stayed to luncheon, and was very anxious to get Laura to ride back to Oaklands with him. This she declined to do. Still it was all very like a page out of their old lives, only there were no jests about Harold Harefoot. In all their conversation not a word of Melbury or the Carews passed. Even the lively Amy refrained from reminding her sister that Laura had always been a favourite name among men of letters, and that Mr. Carew was much ad-

dicted to the study of Schiller, and especially of those poems of his dedicated to 'Laura at the piano,' and Laura in various other pleasing situations.

CHAPTER XVI.

MR. and Mrs. Claude Dashwood had not been married a year yet ; but already ominous stories of the unhappy life they led were whispered about among their intimates. It was said that matters had gone so far that the happy pair had come to blows. That was a gross exaggeration ; but it was quite true that Claude had one day, in a high state of excitement, flung across the room a book which chanced to fall in Violet's lap ; and that she, without waiting to reflect what his aim had been, or if he had had any beyond the momentary relief to his overwrought feelings, flung it back, and with interest, for it struck her husband on the head.

‘Two can play at that game, my friend,’ she exclaimed, and then waited with aggravating calmness to see what he would do.

What could he do ? Utterly ashamed of

himself and her, he sat perfectly silent, humiliated in his own eyes; while Violet, after a pause, got up and rang the bell.

‘Get me a cab,’ when the servant appeared; ‘and tell my maid to go to my room.’

‘Where are you going?’ asked Claude, his voice trembling, not so much from anger as from a miserable sense of the wretchedness of the whole thing.

‘Home. I shall dine there. Perhaps you may have recovered your saintly temper when I come back.’

‘Violet, for God’s sake don’t let us make our differences public talk! If we are to quarrel, let us do it in private.’

‘With all my heart; but I never want to quarrel; it is you. I like a quiet life, and for that reason will go where I shall not run the risk of having books flung at my head.’

‘I did not fling the book at your head; I never meant it to go near you.’

‘What uncommonly bad aim you take then!’ and she left the room.

She had no reticence, and he knew that if

she went home in her present mood the story would soon be in every one's mouth, probably as a good joke.

All his nature shrank from thus publicly airing their domestic brawls. Such exposure seemed a matter of indifference to Violet, but to him it was humiliation ; so he followed her upstairs now, and by apologies and entreaties induced her to stay at home.

It was all very different from his pre-nuptial dreams of married life. His ideal wife was a reverential creature who, if she ventured to dissent from his wishes, even in thought almost, did so with bated breath and timid, deprecating glance ; but reverence had simply been left out of Violet's composition, and even had it not, it is doubtful if she would ever have felt any for such a man as Claude ; and as to timidity and bated breath and deprecating glances, he soon found that however he might have hoped for such a pleasing combination in a wife, in Violet he would never get it. She was as incapable of fear or timidity as of reverence.

That things had come to this pass between them was largely Claude's own doing.

As a rule, the quarrels of married people are not poetic, and they are for the most part profoundly distressing to witness. Those between Claude and Violet were certainly not poetic, and they were exceedingly painful when they were not absurdly ludicrous.

Claude had various beautiful ideas about married life which he tried to carry out; but as Violet's coöperation was absolutely necessary to enable him to do this, difficulties occurred with disagreeable frequency.

He held what some one has called the oak-and-ivy theory of the conjugal state. *He* was the stately oak; *she* was the graceful ivy.

Claude indubitably considered himself an oak, or any other strong thing one likes to think of; but then Violet quite declined to be the graceful ivy, which, by the bye, has been known to kill the best part of the poor oak, which it does not cling to, but encircles and stifles; in fact she made short work with his theories, stigmatising them as 'extraor-

dinary rubbish,' quite unsuited for the wear and tear of everyday life.

Claude's Irish blood belied itself altogether in his dealings with his vivacious little bride. He showed himself totally devoid of humour, and thin-skinned under her ridicule to a marvellous extent.

Ridicule was a weapon he was fond of using against his enemies or adversaries, but when it was turned against himself he proved an arrant coward; and he never had a retort ready for Violet. He took what she called 'the highly moral line,' lecturing her gravely and severely, though he might as well have lectured the wind for blowing or the sea for ebbing and flowing. He made no more impression on her than he could have made on them.

One of the chief causes of quarrel was the lady's determination to smoke and to read French novels of a tendency which her husband pronounced 'vile.' His dismay and disgust on discovering the former propensity exceed description.

After they had been back in England for some months, he went one day into a small room at the Ellises' house, and there found his wife and her sisters all revelling in somewhat potent cigarettes. Had he been wise he would have sat down and joined them; at least he would not have made a scene, but he was not wise, and a tremendous storm ensued. He commanded, exhorted, finally entreated; but she continued obdurate.

The combat lasted many days.

'Say no more about it; it is *chic*, and I will smoke!' she said conclusively after a battle royal on the subject, settling herself back in her chair, and resuming the perusal of one of those yellow-backed volumes which her husband so deprecated.

Claude felt powerless. What could he do? if she refused to accede to his wishes, how was he to enforce compliance? Of course he might have knocked her down, but then if he had done so she would have got up, looked at him calmly and contemptuously, and quitted his house never to return to it. All London

would have rung with his brutality, and his home would have been a wreck. His brother, whom he loved and respected, would have looked coldly on him, and every one whose opinion he valued would have agreed in saying that if he, with his eyes open, chose to marry a girl like Violet Ellis, he ought to have borne the consequences like a man.

But, even could violence have availed aught, which it could not, Claude did not wish to drive matters to extremes.

In all very intimate relations, whether as between husband and wife, brother and sister, mother and daughter, the one who feels least is master of the situation, and Violet felt less than Claude; she was less sensitive, less affectionate, less conscientious, and she was moreover totally reckless of consequences.

The only things she really disliked were violent scenes and personal discomfort, but she hated scenes, not because Claude was angry, but because they disturbed her own enjoyment; and in order to avoid them, as time went on, she learned to deceive him

royally for the sake of peace, and when a 'scene' was unavoidable she would contrive to see as little of him as possible till he had 'recovered from his tantrums,' either going away to her mother's house, or sitting alone in her own room reading or writing. The knowledge that he was quivering with anger against her, or weary and dispirited from the reaction consequent on his fit of violent temper, never disturbed her.

Laura Erle would have been heart-broken after one of those scenes. Violet felt only a profound contempt for and a strong desire to get away from, him.

Yet he had had it in his power, at one time, to acquire immense influence over her. If, instead of disgusting her by long lectures, he had shown any appreciation of *chic*, or now and then smoked a friendly cigarette with her, he might in the end have prevailed on her to abandon even that dear delight, since he objected to it. Instead of this he preached the duty of obedience, at which she laughed, and appealed to religious feelings, of which she was totally devoid.

But, though impervious to all considerations of religion, she had some moral sense, was generous, and could appreciate nobility of character or action in another, while frankly confessing that 'it was a flight beyond her;' and, had Claude only known it, he had one great hold over her at first,—her sincere desire, namely, that her family should not guess that all was not smooth sailing on the sea of her married life.

Till the scene about the smoking she had carefully kept everything from them; after that she had no further need for concealment, and proclaimed her differences with Claude openly. Though there had been many a fierce dispute between them before, none had equalled this in violence and acrimony. On her refusal to promise to abandon the practice (he was still addicted to the habit of exacting promises), Claude, furiously angry, had deemed that the best method of reducing her to submission would be to leave her in solitude; so he announced his intention of dining at his club, and said further that perhaps he should not return home till the following day.

He expected some remonstrance, some sign of dismay or alarm. Never was man more mistaken. She did not even ask where he could possibly be going. 'Very well; I shall dine in —— street' (where her father lived), 'and then go to the play with them.'

This was not by any means what he meant. He forbade her to leave home; 'he did not at all approve of her appearing at the play without him; he was going out, and had he not been going, would not have accompanied her under present circumstances.'

'Luckily, I didn't ask you. If you had been staying at home I should have stayed with you, bearish as you are; but as you are off after some device of your own, I'm not so fond of solitude as to mope here alone all the evening.'

After much more of the same sort he left her, ordering her peremptorily not to go to the play. She did go, and, moreover, slept at her father's house, making no secret of why she did so. 'Claude had been in one of his "tantrums" all day, and had then gone out,

Heaven knew where, saying he would not return that night. She was nervous, and didn't see why she should sit alone because he chose to sulk.'

Mrs. Ellis felt some uneasy qualms; this was an unsatisfactory state of things; but the rest of the family united in condemning Claude as an 'ill-conditioned beggar.' The poor 'beggar,' doubtful of the success of his experiment in the assertion of his marital authority, came home from his club—he had never had the least intention really of stopping away all night—very much inclined to compromise matters; but his conciliatory disposition gave place to bitter anger on seeing the line adopted by his contumacious piece of property.

He usually let himself in with a latch-key; but this night the door was locked, and he had to ring several times before he could gain admittance. When, at length, the butler appeared, Mr. Dashwood learned that every one had understood that he was not coming home, and that Mrs. Dashwood was gone for the night to —— street.

As Claude, who was a very fine gentleman about his dress, never went away, even for a short time, without extensive preparations, and as none had been made on this occasion, the servants were not slow to suspect something; and the incident became the common talk of the two households before many hours had passed.

Mr. Ellis and St. Clare shouted with laughter at Claude's discomfiture, commending Violet's cleverness in 'tackling him.'

In spite of his being the only son-in-law in the family, both Mr. Ellis and St. Clare heartily disliked him. Every house has its own traditions and especial ways of thinking and feeling, and each is apt to consider its own, if not the only, certainly the best way. The Ellises were a genial, good-tempered race, taking life easily, and hating 'bore' or trouble of any sort above all things. To them Claude's touchiness, his moodiness, his disposition to make mountains out of mole-hills, what Violet called his 'shams,' were particularly distasteful; nor was anything more

congenial to their feelings than a good story against him. He was not better liked by his sisters-in-law.

A rather testy parent, whose heir had married into a large and not very pecunious family, was wont to observe contemptuously that his son 'was a sort of god among the six Miss Dashes;' but no one could say that Claude was a sort of god among the five Miss Ellises.

Prone as sisters-in-law are, as a rule, to deify their brothers in the same degree, not one of the five ladies in question ever showed the least disposition to pay divine honours to Claude. They rather made the worst of all his faults, embittering Violet against him, and Mrs. Ellis was the only one who ever offered her a word of good counsel, or seemed to have any sympathy with him. In all the disputes that took place, every one else assumed that he was always wrong, Violet always right; and he was truly as marvellously injudicious as he was supremely miserable.

In spite of Mrs. Ellis's entreaties, her hus-

band and son made a good story out of the dispute about the smoking; so that the domestic differences of Mr. and Mrs. Claude Dashwood became public property, and Violet grew quite reckless.

There was another source of discord between them too. Colonel Wilnot, who had been *en retraite*, for reasons best known to himself, during the period of Claude's wooing, had reappeared, freed henceforth from all difficulties by the long-expected and much-prayed-for death of an uncle.

He had always been on intimate terms with the Ellises, liking and admiring Violet especially. He had given the strongest proof of his regard for her that a man in his position could give. At the time of his deepest impecuniosity he had 'scraped together' money enough to send her a wedding present. Now that he could safely make himself visible again he presented her with a second and more magnificent one; he was, besides, lavish of opera boxes, Greenwich dinners, and many other pleasant things, and naturally, when he

gave a box or a dinner, he was present to see to the welfare of his guests.

He was also much at the Ellises' house, and the Miss Ellises were much with their sister, Mrs. Claude Dashwood, who could now chaperone them about, thus saving their mother. Where they went, Colonel Wilmot went too; and sometimes he went without them to arrange about those dinners and opera boxes.

One way or another he saw a good deal of Mrs. Claude Dashwood, and learned many of the secrets of her domestic life. What he learned did not increase his liking for Claude; and one day he wished, and said openly that he wished, that his respected uncle had been obliging enough to die before, not after, his little friend's marriage.

Claude did not at first object to the intimacy. 'Dick' was, in truth, a pleasant companion. How he had kept his head above water for so many years no one could exactly tell. He did occasionally retire across the Channel for change of air; and report said he had sometimes blacked his own boots. That

was strenuously denied by a friend, who affirmed that it could not have happened, for the simple reason that at the time spoken of Dick had no boots to black. However that may have been, the story, had it been true, would have been much to Dick's credit, for it was more honourable to black his boots himself than to employ another to do it if he could not afford to pay for the service. Then, to the surprise of his intimates, he would reappear, flourishing for a season, till the state of his finances rendered advisable another retreat. He was always welcome among a certain set of people ; for he was good-tempered, amusing, had seen men and cities, and never bored even his worst enemy. Can higher praise than that last be bestowed on a human being? It was the secret of the influence he possessed over the Ellis family. They hated being bored ; Violet especially hated it ; and Claude bored her to extinction, his gloomy dulness making the brilliant Colonel all the more brilliant by contrast.

They had met in Paris during that tour

which Violet had found so wearisome, and Claude had seemed glad to see him; and afterwards in England, when the husband and wife had enacted the parts of Darby and Joan respectively with so little satisfaction to themselves, his presence had been a welcome relief to both. But as time went on and the gay Bohemian was to be seen for ever by Violet's side Claude objected, then grew angry when his advice was disregarded by his wilful bride, and, finally, 'sulked,' as the bride expressed it.

It was all very wrong; but he weakened his own case by blaming her as severely for things which were second nature to her, and to which she could not honestly see any objection, as for real faults. Whatever was disagreeable to him he expected her to give up immediately, no matter how inveterate the habit was or how dear to her, yet he never felt bound to sacrifice any of his ways or fancies out of deference to her. He was highly incensed because she called Colonel Wilmot by the familiar appellation of Dick. 'It was hateful,' he said, 'to hear

a woman call men who were not related to her by their Christian names.' He was equally angry because Colonel Wilmot spoke of and to her as Vi. She had been called Vi all her life by every one; but he objected to the abbreviation altogether—never using it himself, and being desirous of preventing other people from doing so.

All this Violet stigmatised as 'nonsense.' She hated the name of Violet: it was a weak, milk-and-water, bread-and-butter sort of name, she said, only endurable when curtailed into Vi, which had some force and sense in it; and as to Dick, he had been Dick to her as long as she could remember; and was she to begin 'Colonel Wilmoting' him now?

Colonel Wilmot had become aware that his presence was unwelcome to Claude, and when he could do so he avoided him; but he could not quite make up his mind to avoid Violet, though he had no deliberate intention of causing discord between her and her husband.

A man of his habits and life has rarely, if ever, any capacity for real true love left; but

such a wretched remnant of capacity as had survived the wreck of all that is best in man, Violet's image had occupied before her marriage. He had known her from her childhood; and the grace, beauty, and indescribable charm which made even her defects delightful to all but the most determinedly soured and uncharitable had exercised a great fascination over him as she grew towards womanhood. Had he not, owing to his expensive tastes and extravagant habits, been forced to wage a constant war with his tradespeople, he would have liked nothing better than a marriage with her; but a wife was a luxury he could not dream of affording himself. He would not have denied himself one cigar a day for any woman under the sun; but he had regard enough for Violet not to interfere with a good settlement for her when such appeared attainable; and even had he been in England when Claude in his mad delirium threw himself at her feet, he would not have said one word to prevent the match, though such love as he had to bestow was hers, and he more than suspected that he was

the only man who had ever really touched her heart.

When they met in Paris her delight at seeing him had been very genuine and very innocent. They had gone about a good deal together, and Claude had liked him, as has been said; but Colonel Wilmot did not like Claude. He was surprised at the active dislike which he, who had always made it his boast that he looked on life with the calm eye of a philosopher, felt towards him; and this aversion increased when, on his return to England, he resumed his intimacy with the Ellises.

He could not help feeling that he would have been a better husband for Violet than Claude was. Setting a due value on cigarettes and French novels himself, he would never have objected to her valuing them too. Being sensible, he would not have expected her to value anything else. What else could she value, brought up as she had been? Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? He would not have wanted her to go to church

twice on Sunday because women should be religious ; he would have known that she did not fear God, and though it could not be said that she did not regard man, he was aware that she always regarded him with a strict view to settlements or amusement ; he would have entered into her appreciation of *chic*, and would never, in their domestic differences, have taken the ‘highly moral line.’

He did not say all this in so many words ; nevertheless, he felt it, and condemned Claude as a fool who expected to get wheat from a soil in which tares only had been sown. It was then that he expressed that regret for the tardiness shown by his uncle in dying, and somehow Violet came to know that he felt the regret.

This was the state of affairs when Claude and she went down to Oaklands for Christmas. Colonel Wilmot went too ; and though Claude was annoyed, he did not see his way to declining the invitation on that account.

CHAPTER XVII.

AFTER his call on Laura, Claude rode back to Oaklands, feeling much happier, and with more tender thoughts towards Violet than he had had for some time. He determined to drive her over to Smedston on the following day. They had parted in anger that morning; and he now regretted many things he had said to her; but he would make amends, if not by direct words of apology, yet by an affectionate tenderness of manner which she would understand.

He went in search of her to her room, and, not finding her there, proceeded to the drawing-room, where he learned that she was in the billiard-room. This led out of the conservatory, and, in spite of the gentleness in his heart at that moment, he experienced a certain revulsion of feeling on seeing her engaged

in a game of billiards with Colonel Wilmot. Her sisters were present, and there was nothing that need have annoyed him—all were laughing and talking together; nevertheless he did feel annoyed, though he tried to overcome the feeling, and went up to Violet looking far less gloomy than usual; but she, intent only on her game, waved him off.

‘Don’t look at me!’ she exclaimed, in the eager way in which she sometimes spoke; ‘this stroke is my very life!’

It was the thoughtless remark of a thoughtless creature; but it chilled him as completely as if she had designedly meant to place a barrier between them. He had come in bent on conciliating her by greater gentleness and tenderness than he had ever yet shown, and she took no notice of him, save to warn him off.

She missed her stroke, and turned, not to him, but to Colonel Wilmot, with a graceful half-childish stamp of her pretty foot:

‘There, the game is yours; but you may thank Claude for it. I can’t bear to be spoken

to when I'm just going to play; and he knows it.'

A more tolerant and large-hearted man would have seen how little it all meant, and would have gone on unmoved in the course he had laid down for himself; but Claude was neither tolerant nor large-hearted.

'I am sorry I disturbed you,' he said in his coldest tone; 'but I wanted to speak to you, and as I have not seen you all day I conceived I might claim your attention for a few moments now.'

'You went out to please yourself, I fancy; but what is it?'

'Oh, nothing,' frigidly. 'Finish your game; it is of no consequence.'

'I wish you hadn't disturbed me about it, then! Now, Dick, have you played?'

Claude spoke to Margaret Ellis, hardly knowing what he was saying, and then sat down with that look of martyred repression on his face by which touchy men strive to impress on the world their sense of the ill-usage they meet with. His presence threw a gloom

over every one, and deepened Violet's conviction that wherever he came he acted as a wet blanket.

Colonel Wilmot's geniality was certainly an agreeable contrast ; but then Colonel Wilmot had not quarrelled with his wife that morning, repented of it, made all sorts of good resolutions, and come home determined to carry them out, to be met by the sight of that wife playing billiards with a gentleman who called her 'Vi,' and whom she called 'Dick,' both abbreviations abominable in his eyes.

Violet seldom retained anger ; even after a severe storm her smiles and bright ways soon returned, and generally on Claude's entrance she had some playful remark for him. 'Good-morning, Mr. Dashwood ; I hope I see you well ;' or 'Well, Mr. Claude Dashwood, come and give an account of yourself.'

His face always softened when she called him 'Mr. Dashwood.' He could not have said why that special form of address charmed him when coming from her lips, but it did charm

him, though she was quite unconscious of the fact. It was one of the many little graceful playful ways of hers which had kept the breach between them from becoming permanent, incessantly as they quarrelled.

But this evening she neither called him Mr. Dashwood, nor expressed any playful hope that she saw him well; for she had that day heard, for the first time, of his attachment to Laura Erle; his proposal to and subsequent quarrel with her. No story loses in the telling, and so many details, for which there was very slight foundation, were given respecting that brief engagement, and the causes that led to its being broken off, that Violet felt deeply incensed with her husband for not having informed her of it.

After his departure for Smedston in the morning she had with her usual frankness spoken of his anger because she had not told him about Mr. Erle's illness. Colonel Wilmot laughed significantly, saying he was by no means surprised at Claude's anxiety. This led to an explanation.

Strange to say, none of the ladies of the family had heard of any such attachment, but Colonel Wilmot and St. Clare Ellis spoke of it as a well-authenticated fact.

‘How ill-natured of you not to have told me, St. Clare!’ exclaimed Violet.

‘I thought you knew, and only ignored it officially.’

‘What a hypocrite Laura Erle must think me!’ she went on in a tone of annoyance.

‘Don’t distress yourself, *mon amie*,’ said Colonel Wilmot. ‘She knows as well as you do that there are many things in our civilisation to be ignored officially, as St. Clare says; one must amuse oneself,’ he went on philosophically; ‘and it doesn’t do to look too closely into the nature of people’s amusements in this world. We can amuse ourselves, too, you know.’

It was not jealousy that Violet felt; it was anger that Claude had not told her, and resentment with him for objecting to her intimacy with ‘Dick,’ when he himself was indulging in a precisely similar one with

Laura. She did not mention the subject to him, only, on his proposing, when they went up-stairs to dress for dinner, that she should accompany him to Smedston on the following day, she refused, alleging as a reason that she had promised to ride to the meet with Colonel Wilmot.

‘Ride with Wilmot!’ Claude remonstrated angrily. She always objected to riding with him on the score of nervousness; how then could she ride with Wilmot?

‘Because Dick never scolds me, while you make me nervous by nagging at me the whole time.’

‘Violet, I will not have you ride with Wilmot; it is unfit and unseemly in every way that you should do so.’

‘No more unfit than for you to go and spend the day with Laura Erle.’

Claude started as if he had been stung.

‘What do you mean? I have been to Smedston once, to inquire for my oldest friend, who is ill.’

‘Precisely. You are consideration itself

for your old friends; so am I; therefore we suit each other exactly.'

'Heaven knows what you are driving at! But one thing I tell you plainly, I will not have any riding with Wilmot. If you wish to ride, I am always ready to go with you.'

'I wouldn't ride with you for a hundred pounds. You frighten me to death, and then swear at me.'

'You speak as if I never opened my lips without an oath. I swore once when I could not help being angry at your extraordinary folly in thinking the gray, the gentlest creature on earth, was running away with you.'

Violet was an abject coward on horseback; but as Claude rode much himself, and wished her to accompany him, he made several attempts to overcome her timidity. As usual, he went the wrong way to work. Instead of encouraging, he scolded her, till he intimidated her to such a degree that she would have undergone any torture rather than mount a horse under his escort, though with her father or brother she could ride a quiet animal with

great enjoyment. This was a source of excessive annoyance to him, and he never saw her on horseback in their company without secret chagrin; to see her go out with Colonel Wilmot was more than marital equanimity could endure, and he resolved to prevent her doing so, even at the risk of a domestic storm.

‘As you refuse to ride with me, I refuse to sanction your riding about the country with another man,’ he said.

‘Riding about the country with another man! what extraordinary nonsense you do talk!’

‘Very likely; but it is nonsense you will be kind enough to attend to; if not—’ A pause.

‘Well, if not—what then?’

‘Violet, I will not allow you to ride with Wilmot. Surely that is enough.’

‘No,—I want to hear the end of your sentence;—if not?’

He rose and began walking up and down the room, his usual action when disturbed or angry.

‘It is no use walking up and down, that won’t help you, Claude,’ went on his incorrigible bride. ‘If not, you will swear and look more ferocious than usual, I suppose. I don’t see what else you can do.’

‘Violet, do you ever mean to obey me, or to act like a reasonable being?’

‘Never, unless it suits me, or unless you grow reasonable too. I don’t know what effect that might have on me,’ with genial carelessness. ‘I certainly don’t mean to obey you now. To say you won’t allow me to ride a mile with Dick just behind mamma’s pony carriage is to insult him and me and yourself too, only you are so full of absurd notions as not to see it; and before you mount your high horse and talk about “allowing” me, just remember that it takes two to make a bargain.’

‘I am aware of that, Violet. It is you who should remember it: you made me a promise which you now openly repudiate.’

‘As to that, I’m only following your excellent example. I obey you quite as much as you honour and cherish me.’

‘You never obey me at all!’ said the hapless Claude, in a tone of angry despair.

‘And you certainly don’t honour me. Is it honouring me to make out that it is a crime for me to ride to Chorley Wood with my oldest friend? You are uncommonly sharp about my duties; look after your own a little.’

‘I am fulfilling my own in looking after you. I do not say there is any crime in your riding with Wilmot, but I object to it as I object to your intimacy with him entirely. I have told you so a hundred times. Nothing is more odious in my eyes than a flirtation carried on by a married woman.’

‘Flirtation? yes; but there is no flirtation between Dick and me. Ours is a comprehensive friendship.’

‘Comprehensive fiddlestick!’ said Claude, tugging at his moustache.

‘Yes, a comprehensive friendship, founded on mutual respect and sympathy,’ went on the lady in a philosophic tone, kicking out her dress in front, and just showing the point of a very pretty shoe.

‘I wish you would spare a little of your respect and sympathy for the one to whom they are really due.’

‘And so I do. I respect you immensely when you are not cross. When you are, I hate you.’

‘As by your account I am always cross, I may conclude you always hate me?’

‘No; sometimes I like you very much; when you are in a good temper and don’t scold me.’

Had he said a few kind words to her then all would have been well; but he was sore and angry, and too proud to express the softness in his heart. He felt baffled, too. What was he to do with her? How was a man to manage a wife who insisted on her right to indulge in a ‘comprehensive friendship’ with the greatest *roué* in England?

While he walked up and down thinking bitterly on these things, Violet sat back in her chair, playing alternately with her chain and with a rough terrier which lay on her lap.

‘Have you done scolding me?’ she said at last; ‘because if you have, I’ll ring for Barton. I must begin to dress, or I shall be late.’

‘It wants nearly an hour to dinner; you can’t take all that time to dress; however, I won’t keep you. It is evident my society is no pleasure to you.’

‘It isn’t when you are cross,’ coolly.

‘Very well; but remember I distinctly forbid you to ride with Wilmot.’

‘And I distinctly mean to ride with him, if it is fine, so there! Now, Claude, you will have to pray for rain to vindicate yourself in your own eyes.’

Her maid came, and he went away, angry and dispirited. All his tenderness had given place to bitterness; his desire to conciliate her to a determination to conquer her wilfulness, only he did not know how to do it.

They entered the drawing-room together before dinner, he miserable, she as pretty, bright, and unconcerned as if nothing had happened.

Seeing Claude's gloom and the sort of reckless defiance with which Violet treated him, Mrs. Ellis spoke to her on the subject.

'Go and say something to him, Vi. You have not been near him all the evening.'

'He is so cross; and I hate him when he is cross!'

'Don't say that, my dear.'

'Why shouldn't I say it, mamma? it is true. Just see him now! Doesn't he look like a bear?' in the childish petulant tone in which she often spoke.

Her manner was inconsequent enough at times almost to justify those who say that there are women without souls — beautiful Undines whose whole aim is to gratify the passing whim of the moment.

At her mother's repeated entreaty she went up to Claude; but he, deeply angry, would hardly speak to her, and she soon left him for the more congenial group near the piano, where Colonel Wilmot was carelessly turning over some loose music, smiling his

bright smile which showed all his white teeth gleaming under his moustache.

He was not in the least good-looking, and his face told its own tale of dissipation; but his manner was very attractive from its simple naturalness. There was nothing in him of the formidable lady-killer before whom women are supposed to go down like corn beneath the sickle, and though he saw Claude's temper this evening, he had no deliberate intention of causing a quarrel between him and Violet; but it did gratify his vanity to see her appeal to him for sympathy, and to know that Claude resented the appeal. He despised him for resenting it, as he despised him for disliking French novels and cigarettes. More than half the young married women of his acquaintance had one, sometimes two or three, intimates of the other sex, who fetched and carried for them, danced with them, presented them with various gifts, and helped them generally to get through the spare time which, as they were far too womanly and content with their sphere to trouble themselves about such

unsexing things as politics or literature or even their children, did occasionally fall heavily on their hands. Of course now, as of old, mischief is found for idle hands to do, and grave disasters sometimes follow, which afford virtuous people an opportunity of proving their Christianity by passing by on the other side.

Colonel Wilmot did not see why Violet should not, like any other fly, have her little court, or why he should not be first courtier. Claude's scruples seemed to him absurd and unreasonable, — which they were; for Violet, being human, could not live without some occupation or resource, and as her husband would certainly have objected to her had she been literary or political or enthusiastic for humanity, it was unreasonable of him to wish to deprive her of such husks of resource as were left—gossip, flirtation, courtiers, and all the rest of it. Had she been Colonel Wilmot's wife, that gentleman would not have at all objected to her holding a court of her own.

‘Stormy weather!’ he said with a glance

at Claude, as Violet joined the group at the piano.

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘What is it?’ he asked; ‘that game at billiards?’

‘Partly; partly the ride to-morrow.’

‘Does he object?’

‘He objects to everything that is pleasant.’

‘But it is absurd! It is an insult to us both—to himself.’

Another shrug of the pretty shoulders.

‘Then you won’t come?’

‘I shall.’

Colonel Wilmot bit his moustache.

‘Better not make a row, Vi,’ he said, after a pause. ‘If Dashwood is such a—’ The rest of the sentence was lost in his moustache, or in the depths of his own consciousness.

Fortunately for the peace of every one concerned, the following day was so wet that riding to the meet or anywhere else was out of the question.

Had Violet said no more about it all would have been well, but the very demon

of recklessness seemed to possess her, and she not only kept on congratulating Claude on the success of his prayers for rain, but complained openly to every one that he had accused her of flirting, and forbidden her to ride with her own and her brother's oldest friend. There was a chorus of astonished protestation, and Claude was very angry. If there was one thing he disliked more than another, it was being thus held up to family odium. His secret feeling was that when a man objects to his wife doing any especial thing, she should carry out his wishes, but always as if they were her own, never representing him in an invidious or disagreeable light; but Violet was perpetually holding him up as a tyrant, 'cross,' 'in a tantrum,' or some other objectionable phase of being.

In answer to the family protest he said courageously that he did not approve of Violet's riding with Colonel Wilmot; it might be a foolish prejudice on his part, he admitted, but it was one he thought his wife ought to respect.

‘But, my dear,’ said Mrs. Ellis soothingly, ‘Margaret and Georgie were going too.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ with a reproachful glance at Violet. ‘Of course that alters the case. I understood you were going alone.’

‘Did you? I can’t be answerable for what you understand.’

‘Violet, don’t be unreasonable,’ in an exculpatory tone, wishing to justify himself in the eyes of those present. ‘When you make arrangements independently of me, surely I have a right to expect that you will explain them fully to me before asking me to consent to them.’

‘I did not consider it necessary to ask your consent to such a trifle as taking a ride with my sister.’

‘Nor is it. You persist in misunderstanding me. I only ask you to be open and straightforward.’

‘You have always been so open and straightforward yourself!’

He had not the least idea to what she could be alluding; and unwilling to bandy

words with her any longer, sat down to write a letter.

Presently he rose, and asked her to accompany him up-stairs. He spoke gently, mollified by finding that she had not meditated a ride alone with Colonel Wilmot.

‘What do you want? To scold me, I suppose?’ raising her blue eyes to his face.

There was neither deprecation nor affection in the look—merely a sort of weariness of him and of the whole thing. He saw it, and was deeply wounded. His tenderness of the preceding day had returned, and he was anxious now for a reconciliation. He thought she looked pale, and he had heard her complain to her mother of having a headache. That touched his heart, causing him to feel some compunction at the reflection that perhaps he had been harsh to her. He did not like to think of himself as ‘cross,’ and a tyrant, to this bright creature, who seemed made to be spoiled and indulged. ‘And why should you be the only one not to spoil me?’ she had once said, when he reproached

her with having been over-indulged all her life.

He was hurt in his self-esteem by her look and question now.

‘I did not want to scold you, dear,’ he said in an exculpatory tone.

‘That is a wonder; you generally do;’ and she rose, somewhat wearily, to accompany him.

‘Never mind,’ he said, in a pained way; ‘I will not trouble you. I don’t expect you to inconvenience yourself for me.’

She sank back again, relieved, with a look which implied plainly, ‘I’ve escaped this time.’

Claude went away, not so much angry, as hurt and bitter. His attempts at conciliation seemed all to be thrown back on himself, unappreciated. He felt alone, miserable, forgetting that the preceding evening she might have been won, had he not been too proud to say a kind word to her.

He went to the billiard-room, and sat smoking—how long he knew not. Then came voices—Margaret, Georgie, Violet, no longer

pale and weary, but animated, gay as usual, and Colonel Wilmot challenging her to a return game of billiards. All seemed surprised at seeing him there, disagreeably surprised, he thought.

He left the room, and, ordering his horse, rode to Smedston through a driving storm of rain and wind.

CHAPTER XVIII.

‘CLAUDE! What a day to be out!’ was Laura’s exclamation on seeing him come in dripping wet.

Her bright greeting was balm to him. Her wish that he should not think she retained a trace of ill-feeling regarding past occurrences made her manner even more gently winning than usual. Amy Erle, who worshipped her sister, and who had warmly resented Claude’s conduct, had been inclined to treat him with distant coldness; but Laura had duly lectured her, and exacted a promise that she would receive him just as if nothing had happened; so she, too, was all smiles and welcome; and Mr. Erle was genuinely glad to see him. Every one made a fuss about him; and Mrs. Erle crowned the reception by administering with her own

hands some hot concoction, her unfailing antidote against catching cold after being wet.

Claude could not but notice the contrast : at Oaklands no one appeared to care for him — ‘no eye marked his coming, or looked brighter when he came;’ here every one was glad to see him. It was like the familiar home atmosphere after months of weary exile; he was again among his own people. There were the old topics, the old jests—above all, the brightening effect, as of sunshine, always produced on him by Laura’s presence.

Claude, pining for affection, felt a quiet satisfaction creeping over him as he sat in the well-known room with the kindly faces round him. Laura had had a long letter from Audrey that morning, and they all discussed the doings of the foreign party like people who had a common concern in them.

Violet would never show any interest in Audrey or her affairs; and as love for his sister was one of the strongest feelings in Claude’s nature, he had experienced a constant blank. Now the craving to talk of her

and her concerns was satisfied, and he was happy for a short time.

He was a man who could not live without a woman to confide in. Had the world contained no young and pretty one, he would have imparted his secrets to an old and plain one. Even his domestic troubles seemed lighter now, after he had poured them forth to Laura. He began gloomily enough, when he found an opportunity, recounting all that had taken place since he had seen her yesterday, and dwelling on the unpromising result of his attempts at conciliation.

Laura listened gravely, and then said, after a pause :

‘Well, Claude, it does seem wrong of Violet; but I am sure she does not realise how much you dislike it. You must remember how people’s ideas of these things differ.’

‘I abhor anything like flirtation in a married woman.’

‘But I feel sure Violet does not mean anything so serious as a flirtation.’

‘No; she calls it a comprehensive friend-

ship,' in a tone of disgust unrelieved by one gleam of amusement.

Laura could not help laughing.

'Oh, Claude, what a delightful idea! How could you be angry with her?'

Her laughter was infectious, and in former days had always made him laugh from sympathy. He smiled now, and then laughed too in unison with her.

'It is so like Violet,' said Laura. 'Did she say it to you?'

'To my very face.'

'I would have given anything to have seen you both! Didn't you ask to be comprehended in the friendship too?'

'No; I can't say I did. I don't fancy that sort of joint-stock concern.'

'I can imagine how ferocious you looked!'

'I daresay I did; I know I felt ferocious.'

Nevertheless, the contumacious Violet's enormities looked less enormous when viewed in the glow thrown on them by that tender kindness of heart, that loving half-humorous tolerance, which were Laura's most marked

characteristics. They fell like sunshine on all around her, and, like sunshine, softened and beautified every one and everything within their reach.

‘I wish you would come over and see Violet,’ said Claude finally. ‘I should like you to be her friend, Laura; she could not have a better one. You might just as well ride over with me some day.’

Laura felt, but did not say, ‘Violet might as reasonably object to that as you do to her riding with Colonel Wilmot.’

She would not promise to ride with him, but said that she would ask Violet to come and see her.

‘You might be able to influence her,’ he added in a dejected way; ‘which is more than I can do. She listens to what I say only to disregard it.’

But he went back feeling brighter for his visit, and again bent on conciliating Violet.

He found her with a bad headache, and that gave him the excuse he needed. Illness sufficed to soften his worst temper; and

her suffering enabled him to be tender and solicitous for her without any compromise of his dignity. He overwhelmed her with attentions, which at any other time would have pleased her, but to which she did not on this occasion respond, still feeling resentful at that want of confidence on his part about Laura.

She had ascertained that he had gone to Smedston ; and the fact had been commented on with some severity by her and her sisters.

Even Mrs. Ellis, anxious as she was to be a peacemaker, could not but admit that, as he was so averse to her intimacy with Colonel Wilmot, it would have been wiser not to have left her the whole of a very wet day to play billiards, or otherwise kill time, in that gentleman's society, while he himself paid a visit of many hours' duration to Laura Erle.

‘What did you do with yourself, all day, dearest?’ he asked, when he was sitting with her after his return.

‘Played billiards with Dick,’ looking at him defiantly. His forehead contracted a

little, but he maintained a heroic calm. 'What did you do?' she questioned.

'I rode over to Enleigh ; I wanted to give some orders there ; and then I went to Smedston to inquire for poor Erle.'

'You lunched there?'

'I did.'

'Then you saw Laura?'

'Yes ; she is anxious to see you.'

'I thought you hated Laura Erle?'

'Hated her? Why should you think that?' He was sitting by the sofa on which she was lying, and as he asked that question he took her hand and began twisting her rings round and round.

'You told me you did ; that she was odious and strong-minded.'

'Did I? But even if I did, that would not prevent my inquiring for her father.'

'Do you hate her?'

He disliked speaking to Violet about Laura at all. It hurt the false pride and perverted idea of his own dignity he had, to feel that she was entitled to know any-

thing which he was disinclined to impart. To this was added now another cause. He felt a sudden shame at avowing that which he had before concealed, especially after all he had said to her about Colonel Wilmot; but as Violet asked, 'Do you hate her?' fixing her eyes on him, he had to answer, 'No; certainly not. Why should I?'

'Then why did you make all that fuss in Paris?'

'Well—oh! because just then I didn't want to buy presents for any one but you,' stooping and kissing her. That was a virtual falsehood, and Claude knew it; but he did not deem it any great dishonour when told to a woman, especially when that woman was his wife.

Violet knew it was a falsehood too; and it destroyed any little shadow of respect she had for her husband, which was not much, it must be admitted. It is true she told him falsehoods herself without any hesitation, when it suited her, about every-day affairs, and never felt that she was wrong in doing so.

She had not been brought up to think truth or sincerity feminine virtues ; but as Claude held that women should be religious, though men need not be so, she held that men should be truthful and honest, although no like necessity was laid on women ; and when she found a man out in a falsehood she conceived a sort of half-lazy, half-cynical contempt for him. She felt this for Claude now. There was no anger in the feeling, no disappointment in him. She had little or no belief in goodness, except perhaps in that of one or two women, and was as coldly cynical as any *blasé* worn-out old bachelor who believes neither in God nor man, but only in his dinner and his cigars.

Yet though she had always denounced what she called Claude's 'shams,' she had a faint belief, deep down in her heart, that he perhaps respected some of them himself. His want of sincerity and openness about Laura quenched that belief, and any slight hesitation she may have had about continuing her intimacy with Colonel Wilmot vanished.

She had given Claude an opportunity of

confiding in her, had he wished to do so ; he had not availed himself of it, and she would henceforth go her own way. That was her conclusion as she listened to his words and accepted or suffered his caress. She made no further allusion to Laura, and he congratulated himself on having successfully parried her queries.

END OF VOL. II.

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